

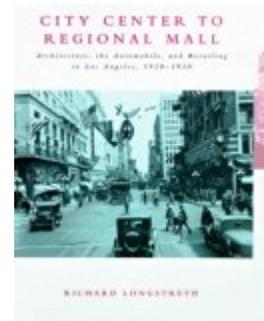
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard Longstreth. *City Center to Regional Mall*. Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1997. xxxi + 504 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-262-12200-9.

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Los Angeles and Commercial Geography

Richard Longstreth, Professor of American Civilization at George Washington University, pursues two goals in his book *City Center to Regional Mall: Architecture, the Automobile, and Retailing in Los Angeles, 1920-1950*. First, he wishes to argue that the appearance of the regional shopping center in the 1950's, while representing a radical break from the dense, noisy downtowns that dominated commercial activity in pre-war American cities, arrived gradually, with many precedents. Second, that Los Angeles emerged as the harbinger for this gradual commercial decentralization, much as Chicago and New York emerged as the cutting edge for skyscraper development. Los Angeles, long regarded as idiosyncratic or plain bizarre, instead provided the precedents for this thirty-year shift from a monocentric commercial core to increasingly peripheralized, polycentric regional malls. As such, this voluminous, lavishly illustrated book is an important contribution to both the field of urban history and the evolution of Los Angeles commercial landscapes.

In Chapter One, Longstreth lays out the basic contours of early twentieth-century Los Angeles: its low-density urban form; its reliance on linear public transportation, soon to be overtaken by the automobile; its newness, along with massive population growth; its attraction to those seeking to create a different matrix for urban living, part city and part countryside. In sum, Los Angeles was in many ways unique, yet it conformed to at least one characteristic of other cities: a reliance on a single, dense commercial core downtown.

Chapter Two describes this core, one of the largest on the continent. One dark cloud, however, threatened the vitality of downtown commerce: the increased popularity of the automobile. In response, commercial layout and architecture would shift dramatically over a thirty-year period, and it is the nature of this shift that articulates much of the book.

The next three chapters focus on peripheral arterial commercial development, beginning with relatively unplanned growth, such as those on Western Avenue, to Hollywood Boulevard and the landmark developments along "Fabulous" Wilshire Boulevard. Hollywood and Wilshire in particular represented clear breaks with past commercial development, because they were not designed to complement downtown but rather to challenge its hegemony.

The size and scope of these linear developments, unprecedented in North America, were epitomized by the "Miracle" Mile, developed by the visionary A.W. Ross. With its fringe location, this development along Wilshire Boulevard appeared foolish at first glance. Nonetheless, the bold vision of a linear downtown, free from congestion and providing ample parking, ensured the remarkable expansion, if not exodus, of stores from downtown (and Hollywood) to Wilshire. On the other end of the spectrum, the "lone-wolf" location of Bullock's Wilshire Department Store also signaled the advent of a new, automobile-oriented shopping experience. The assumption remained, however, that there would be one center,

perhaps the downtown core, perhaps a more centrally-located, linear “core”.

In contrast, Chapter Six breaks with linear development and focuses instead on planned commercial developments that catered to the pedestrian, although clearly automobile-oriented. In Palos Verdes, a large-scale, planned city, the commercial core would be separate from residential lots, and feature an intimate architectural scale. Commerce would not encroach upon residential lots, nor would residential lots impinge on commercial expansion. Along these lines, Westwood represented a more fully-realized project. Combining the intimate scale of Palos Verdes with a regional vocation, Westwood Village would rise to challenge Hollywood and Miracle Mile as the prime Westside alternative to downtown.

In Chapters Seven and Eight, the continued problems raised by the automobile and parking were once again addressed, through comprehensive planning (Beverly Hills) and the use of vacant lots (downtown). It was becoming apparent, however, that a new paradigm was needed, one that catered to both the automobile, including the advent of the freeway, and the shopper once on foot. Once again, Los Angeles emerged as a harbinger of change when the Crenshaw Center opened in 1947 amid undeveloped fields. Located six miles from downtown, the Center was planned to cater to a (largely potential) clientele. Moreover, the Center made ample provision for parking, and featured two branches of major department stores (Broadway and the May Company) that were designed to compete with, and not merely complement, downtown equivalents. Despite these cutting-edge components, the development remained very much streetfront-oriented (as were smaller-scale regional projects at the same time, in Westchester, West Los Angeles).

In Chapters Ten and Eleven, Longstreth traces the final acceptance of an entirely separate, inward-facing commercial establishment, surrounded by parking but designed to encourage pedestrian perambulation once inside the complex. Anticipated by early “shopping courts” in Los Angeles, such as the Farmer’s Market (1934) and Crossroads of the World (1937), these interior spaces were pedestrian-friendly. By the mid-1950’s, the local and national dominance of these regional malls was complete, although Los Angeles was no longer the clear leader. Their spread signaled a shift in thinking: the city would no longer have one but many alternatives to downtown, spread across an increasingly polycentric commercial landscape. This commercial decentralization would presage similar trends in office decentralization by

at least thirty years.[3]

I believe this book to be crucial in two aspects. First, it traces in detail the long (progressive?) struggle to implement the proper spatial commercial arrangement to accommodate the rise of the automobile and its unintended consequences. The built environment proved quite resistant to the physical implementation of an automobile-centered shopping experience, and most developers insisted on incorporating at least some streetfront design. By the 1950’s, however, the automobile determined the location, arrangement and size of commercial cores. The street was for cars; the shopping mall for pedestrians, and the two were kept very separate. In thirty years, commerce had gone from clustered to linear to detached, boulevard to freeway, streetfront to forecourt, downtown to suburb. He explodes the myth that regional malls appeared without precedent, dropped in to the urban fabric in the 1950’s like other 1950’s fads.

Thus, the streetfront paradigm would be put on hold until the 1980’s, when festival marketplaces made a conspicuous comeback (in Los Angeles, Universal City Walk and Third Street Promenade), in many ways replicating some of the flair that both Hollywood and Miracle Mile once possessed. In effect, the modernist, box-like regional mall was rejected for more colorful, yet ultimately sanitized, “postmodern” shopping experiences.[4]

Second, Longstreth’s sober analysis of Los Angeles is refreshing, given the enormous hype surrounding the City of Angels. In contrast to the prognostications of the loosely-defined “Los Angeles School”, with their strident calls for recognizing L.A. as the “Capital of the Twentieth Century,”[2] Longstreth is rather modest in his claims of paradigmatic status. Instead of concentrating on the spectacular, he focuses on the everyday architecture and layout of commercial establishments over a thirty-year period. His work betrays a close, almost respectful, investigation of L.A.’s built form, not entirely different from Reyner Banham’s 1971 classic, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*. [1] I believe that his book would surely provide a firm basis for explaining some of the processes behind the past and current fragmentation of Los Angeles, if not the rest of North America.

In contrast to Joel Garreau’s hyperbolic analysis about the supposed unprecedented nature of Edge Cities, Longstreth calmly traces the gradual, even tentative, shift towards the regional mall. The main drawback to the work is the close focus on agency, architecture and plans, to the detriment of larger, more structural explanations for commercial decentralization. The author never

spelled out clearly the structural impetuses for decentralization, such as the uneven development and creative destruction of capitalism; the effects of immigration and racism upon locational decisions; and the fiscal and legal constraints facing the local state, and how those impacted local development.

Moreover, the author generally ignores national trends in federally-subsidized suburbanization, including highway construction and massive white flight. If commercial decentralization was as much about ideas and visions as it was about parking lots and buildings, then surely Longstreth could have incorporated some of the discourses of decline regarding the central city, which only helped to encourage the core's lack of regional competitiveness. A structural perspective would also complement a more in-depth treatment of crucial mediating institutions: banks, the planning department, public transit agencies, etc. Instead, Longstreth portrays the process of decentralization as more the domain of agents: principally, the automobile and maverick developers such as A.W. Ross.

I further believe that Longstreth's conclusion could have been made more interesting by providing more information on the post-1950's fate of some key commercial developments. For instance, both Hollywood Boulevard and the Miracle Mile have radically different vocations in the 1990's: the former's commerce is almost entirely tourist-oriented, and the large department stores have all closed, while the latter has oriented itself towards museums and restaurants, and all of its department stores have also closed. Both of their fates were sealed by a post-1950's trend: the appearance of regional

malls in dense urban areas, beginning in 1972 with the Broadway Plaza downtown. Thus a full circle, the opening of the gargantuan Beverly Center in 1976 effectively sealed the (commercial) fates of both Hollywood and the Miracle Mile. Once again, Los Angeles seemed on the forefront of commercial re-centralization. A final complaint may be registered concerning the prominence of maps in Longstreth's presentation. It seems surprising that in a book dedicated to demonstrating the evolution of commercial decentralization, the maps were clustered at the front, and not incorporated into the text. The ineffectiveness of the maps, however, is more than compensated for by the copious use of photographs, illustrations and plans.

Notes:

[1]. Reyner Banham. *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.

[2]. See Michael Dear and Steve Flusty, *The Iron Lotus: Los Angeles and Postmodern Urbanism*. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*. 551: 151-163, 1997; and Edward Soja. *Postmodern Geographies*. New York: Verso Press, 1989.

[3]. Joel Garreau. *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier*. New York: Anchor Books, 1991.

[4]. David Harvey. *The Conditions of Postmodernity*. New York: Blackwell, 1989.

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