H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John A. Jakle, Keith A. Sculle. *The Gas Station in America.* Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994. xi + 272 pp. $32.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8018-4723-3.

Reviewed by Tom Dicke

Published on H-PCAACA (May, 1995)

This is a unique study of the gas station in popular culture because Jakle, a geographer, and Sculle, a historian, focus on the typical rather than the unusual. The authors have no unifying thesis or theme; their goal is to look at the gas station from a variety of perspectives. Many of these views, and the insights that come from them, will probably be new to historians. Readers with an interest in the interplay between popular culture, corporate image, and architectural form will find parts of this study useful and fascinating. The book does, however, have two noticeable weaknesses: the authors do not adequately consider the impact of economic factors in station design and location, and they only partially integrate the material they present. Most of the chapters could stand alone, and in fact, four of the book's nine chapters are based on previously published articles.

The book is overly compartmentalized but its overall organization is logical. Jakle and Sculle first argue the importance of the gas station as a cultural icon, discuss the relevant literature, and define the "place-produce-packaging" scheme they believe has been the driving force in station design since the 1920s.

They justify the gas station as an important cultural symbol partly because of Americans' fascination with the automobile and partly as a matter of sheer numbers. Roughly 200,000 gasoline stations were scattered over the landscape during the thirty years prior to the oil shocks of 1970s. Well over 100,000 still operate.

The most unique feature of this section is the fairly extensive biographies, written in the third person, that chronicle the authors' long standing interest in gasoline stations and their professional training and influences.

Jakle and Sculle's description of the concept of "place-produce-packaging," is valid. Essentially they argue that the push for uniformity came from roadside sellers' desire to use everything on the lot from the buildings and their contents to the employees to create a distinctive corporate image. Their discussion of the literature is enlightening, particularly for business historians, because they focus on how these three- dimensional advertisements were perceived by the motoring

public. They discuss ideas on the social meaning of the roadside as interpreted in the fields of architectural studies, cultural geography and popular culture.

The authors also trace major trends in gasoline retailing from the 1920s to the early 1990s including brief biographies of the major retailers and the fluctuations of their market areas. Readers already familiar with the oil industry will find little new here. Those in other disciplines should find this section very helpful.

The real heart of the book comes in the three chapters dealing with gas station design. The first is an overview of dominant types of station design from the 1910s through the 1990s. Popularity was determined by examining the NATIONAL PETROLEUM NEWS for illustrations and advertisements of various station types. Gasoline was originally vended most commonly through curbside pumps, often operated as a sideline to an exiting business. By 1920 the true gasoline station, usually disguised as a house to better fit residential environments, dominated. During the 1930s the trend shifted more to the utilitarian box with bays, a move that continued until the 1980s when the booth style and then the convenience store began to dominate new construction. As with the section on gasoline retailing, many readers of this list will be on familiar ground here. The authors use secondary sources or periodicals exclusively. You get a clear description of what happened but little insight into why. Was, for example, station location shifting from residential to commercial zones, thus making the utilitarian box a better fit with its environment? Did changes in housing styles such as the fading of the bungalow and ascendancy of the mass produced ranch increase the popularity of the oblong box by making it appear more houselike? What role did the "place-product-package" concept play in the shift in styles?

The answers to some of these questions are suggested in the detailed case studies of the design process at a large corporation and two regional marketers. Here the collaboration between disciplines works best. The description of the origins and evolution of Pure Oil's famous "English cottage" design from the mid-1920s through the end of World War Two is absorbing. The authors' use of primary materials, including interviews with C.A. Petersen, the originator of the design, is first-rate. Readers see clearly Pure's intent to use the gas station to create a distinctive and calculated corporate image. To explain how and why people were so taken with the little cottage-like stations Jakle and Sculle enter the realms of cultural geography, popular culture, and psychology.

The authors then shift their attentions to two regional marketers, Barkhausen Oil Company of Green Bay, Wisconsin during the 1920s and Quality Oil Company of Winston-Salem during the 1930s to see how local independents attempted to create a distinctive identity for and through their stations. Again the reader sees the gas station from both sides of the pumps. Although less extensive than their treatment of Pure Oil, this is still a detailed look at an overlooked aspect of gasoline marketing.

The last view Jakle and Sculle offer is of the shift from horses to automobiles in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois and the evolution of a commercial strip on one of the streets connecting the two towns. Here, as throughout the book, the authors' observations are detailed and informative. The extensive use of maps makes it easy to visualize the changes brought by the automobile. The downtowns and connecting strip were in a continual process of re-creation and it is intriguing to see ninety years of change condensed into 20 some pages. As with most of the other chapters, material is presented from the vantage point of the motorist. The ebb and flow of gas stations and other businesses across the landscape is clearly shown but only partly explained. The authors, for example ignore the oil shocks of the 1970s, the decline of the routine maintenance and repair business, and the rise of self-service when discussing

the decline in the number of service stations and the rise of the convenience store.

Overall, the book is lavishly illustrated with over 150 photographs, maps, floor plans, or drawings. The prose is generally in the somewhat clumsy style that may someday be known as "late twentieth century academic," but Jakle and Sculle resist the temptation to become bogged down in jargon. This book is a true interdisciplinary study that could be profitable read and understood by those in several disciplines.

Copyright (c) 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-pcaaca

Citation: Tom Dicke. Review of Jakle, John A.; Sculle, Keith A. *The Gas Station in America.* H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. May, 1995.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=51

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.