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Introduction

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ROADSIDE ARCHITECTURE



Crossroads
store and gas
pump. Walker
Evans, 1936.

by Linda Bayer

The American city—like its European prototype—developed during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a pedestrian city. The densely settled downtowns combined retail and wholesale dealers, professional and governmental offices, churches, theaters, and industry in one centralized area. Residences were an integral part of this mix with families often living above their business while detached or row houses were built immediately surrounding this multipurpose concentration. This informal arrangement of functions was dictated by a lack of efficient modes of transportation and communication which made it a necessity for people and businesses to be in close proximity to each other—ideally within walking distance. Following the Civil War, the cities rapidly increased in population yet the physical limits of the pedestrian city remained constant at two to three miles, the distance a person reasonably could be expected to walk to work. As a consequence, the larger cities became dangerously congested as more and more people crowded into them.

But during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, this historic fabric began to unravel as a result of the introduction of local mass transit in the form of street railways. As tracks were

laid from the city center into the surrounding countryside, the wealthy could escape the chaos of the city and build comfortable suburban homes along the lines of the railway. Cities began to expand beyond the previously imposed boundaries as residential neighborhoods built up on either side of the car lines. The result was a city which still had a congested core of laborers and poor while the wealthy spread out along spokes radiating from this center.

This process greatly accelerated during the early years of the twentieth century with the introduction and mass acceptance of the automobile. For the first time in history people had the means for highly efficient individual travel. No longer did they have to live within walking distance of the downtown or of the streetcar line: with a car, they could choose to live anywhere there were roads. And as more and more people found the means to own an auto, they created a demand for more and better roads. Once again the shape of the city experienced an alteration because the land between the streetcar spokes could be developed for homesites as could land lying at a considerable distance from the downtown.

During the twentieth century, the multitude of functions that once had been

forced into the central business district began to disperse, and as they did so, pressure was exerted by homeowners to segregate land uses through zoning. Specific sections of the city were designated for industrial and wholesale use and for retailing to protect the residential neighborhoods from these incompatible uses. The retail merchants, who were always eager to be convenient to their clientele, began relocating on major streets that offered easy automobile access and convenient parking. The attempt to capture the automobile consumer led merchants first to neighborhood shopping districts, then to retail strips along major streets and highways, and finally to large enclosed shopping malls surrounded by acres of free parking. In short, the layout, shape, functioning, and organization of the American city today has been determined to a major degree by the automobile.

The railroads during the nineteenth century were responsible for the creation of a new type of building—the depot—which had not existed previously. In the same way the automobile has been responsible for a variety not only of new building types but also of new activities which required yet more unique structures. Just a few of these twentieth century types are gasoline stations, tire stores and auto repair shops, motels, drive-in movies, drive-in banks, shopping malls, fast food restaurants and parking garages, not to mention the extraordinary interchanges created as part of the interstate highway system.

Yet for the most part all of these structures of our car culture have escaped serious consideration by preservationists and cultural historians. There are several reasons for this neglect. Roadside architecture is widely perceived as a necessary evil, something we must tolerate in order to maintain our style of life, while its ubiquitous presence lulls us into the belief that it will always be around. However, these structures evolve and then

disappear so quickly that already the earliest examples are becoming exceedingly rare. But probably the characteristic that makes auto architecture most unappreciated is its reliance on loud, assaulting visual images: bright shiny colors and odd shapes seem to scream out for our attention. And indeed that is their very purpose.

This last trait evolved as a direct response to the very specific requirements of high speed individual travel. In the pedestrian city people walked down the streets so they could easily read small signs and window shop; the subtle sales pitch was effective when the customer was on foot. All of this changed when the shopper was in a car moving at high speed; his attention had to be focused primarily on the road so that for anything else to catch his eye it must be highly visible and easily read. Because of this, the highway businessman perfected an architecture based on bright colors, distinctive forms, and huge illuminated signs. In addition to attracting the motorist's eye, this architecture aimed for instant recognition based purely on consistent combinations of shape and color, which explains the popularity of standardized designs and colors for all the buildings of each franchise. The motorist can identify at a glance his brand of gasoline, his favorite hamburger, and his choice of motel—all without reading a single word or taking his eyes from the road.

All the varieties of roadside architecture have been constantly evolving over the last sixty years to reach their present forms, which are even now being refined and altered in response to present day social and economic conditions. Although there are several building types that could be examined to illustrate the origins and adaptations of auto architecture, two of the earliest and most interesting are the gasoline filling station and the motel. The following discussion is by no means definitive; it is meant to serve merely as an introduction to a subject that has been too long neglected.