

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 9
Number 1 *Roadside Architecture*

Article 5

9-22-1982

Preservation

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Recommended Citation

Bayer, Linda (1982) "Preservation," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. Vol. 9: No. 1, Article 5.
Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol9/iss1/5>

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Preservation

The automobile is European by birth, American by adoption....The transformation of the automobile from a luxury for the few to a convenience for the many was definitely an American achievement, and from it flowed economic and social consequences of almost incalculable magnitude. The American automobile industry has grown into the largest manufacturing operation in the world...and American life is organized predominantly on the basis of the universal availability of motor transportation.

John Rae, in the opening paragraph of "The American Automobile," states the case succinctly: American culture and society of the twentieth century cannot be understood or evaluated without placing the automobile squarely in the middle of such considerations. For this reason, future generations of architectural historians will undoubtedly regard auto-generated structures as among the most important artifacts of our age. It would be a shame if we were so short-sighted that we failed to preserve and document this significant segment of our built environment.

It has been almost fifty years since Henry Russell Hitchcock, the preeminent architectural historian, wrote: "The combination of strict functionalism and bold symbolism in the best roadside stands provides, perhaps, the most encouraging

sign for the architecture of the mid-twentieth century." Yet for the most part we still ignore these structures when evaluating the contemporary architectural scene. We have become too accustomed to judging architecture on the basis of whether it is pretty or ugly and concluding that the latter is not important or relevant, is beyond the limits of serious consideration, or is, perhaps, not even architecture. Decades of concentrating on beautiful, pretentious mansions and architect-designed public buildings have blinded us to the value of those structures that fail to arouse our aesthetic wonder.

Whether the forms of roadside architecture are currently perceived as good, bad, or indifferent is beside the point. The point is that all three need to be recorded and understood as comprising a significant part of the American experience. A study of the history of architecture, when examined within the context of the society that produced it, reveals that the buildings of each place and period reflect the taste, technology and culture of their times, and that the surviving remnants acquire for later generations an added importance for this very reason. They can supply information, both architectural and societal, that is not revealed by written documents or even photographic records.

As Daniel Vieyra observed: "A realistic preservationist must recognize that this century's commercial architecture reflects modern culture as much as older buildings typify yesteryear's. The gas station, itself the premier drive-in building, has a history and rich design heritage of its own; as a significant part of the built environment, it is worthy of preservation."

If we are to succeed in preserving representative examples of this portion of twentieth century life, we must act quickly. As discussed above, roadside architecture has a very limited life span, and already many of the best early structures have succumbed to the pressures of modern life. Curbside gas stations, cabin camps and cottage courts, and the first generation of McDonald's have virtually disappeared from American highways.

These represent specific phases of design that are vanishing; more serious still is the demise of the drive-in movie, an entire form of roadside architecture that will soon be extinct. The structures of previous centuries usually had the luxury of continuing in use until their heritage became obvious. The buildings of our roadsides are not so fortunate; within a lifetime, they are created, refined, and discarded.

In the case of roadside architecture, we cannot depend on our children and grandchildren to appreciate and preserve the buildings we have erected. We must take that responsibility ourselves—perhaps on faith. Only then will our children and grandchildren have the opportunity to evaluate what we have built. I suspect they will be enchanted by it.

