CRABGRASS FRONTIER

The Suburbanization of the United States

Kenneth T. Jackson

New York    Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1985
The Drive-in Culture of Contemporary America

The human animal has two profound and conflicting impulses; he wants to be safe and warm, snug, enclosed, 'at home.' And he wants to roam the wide world, to see what is out there beyond the horizon. The automobile is a kind of house on wheels, but it will take you anywhere you want to go. You can conduct your sex life in it, you can eat and drink in it, go to the movies, listen to Vivaldi or the Stones, and you can dominate others, if you have more power and are adept with the gearshift lever. It is a whole existence. Or it is till the gas runs out.

—McDonald Harris
New York Times, May 16, 1979

The postwar years brought unprecedented prosperity to the United States, as color televisions, stereo systems, frost-free freezers, electric blenders, and automatic garbage disposals became basic equipment in the middle-class American home. But the best symbol of individual success and identity was a sleek, air-conditioned, high-powered, personal statement on wheels. Between 1950 and 1980, when the American population increased by 50 percent, the number of their automobiles increased by 200 percent. In high school the most important rite of passage came to be the earning of a driver’s license and the freedom to press an accelerator to the floor. Educational administrators across the country had to make parking space for hundreds of student vehicles. A car became one’s identity, and the important question was: 'What does he drive?' Not only teenagers, but also millions of older persons literally defined themselves in terms of the number, cost, style, and horse-power of their vehicles. 'Escape,' thinks a character in a novel by Joyce Carol Oates, 'As long as he had his own car he was an American and could not die.'

Unfortunately, Americans did die, often behind the wheel. On September 9, 1899, as he was stepping off a streetcar at 74th Street and
Central Park West in New York, Henry H. Bliss was struck and killed by a motor vehicle, thus becoming the first fatality in the long war between flesh and steel. Thereafter, the carnage increased almost annually until Americans were sustaining about 50,000 traffic deaths and about 2 million nonfatal injuries per year. Automobility proved to be far more deadly than war for the United States. It was as if a Pearl Harbor attack took place on the highways every two weeks, with crashes becoming so commonplace that an entire industry sprang up to provide medical, legal, and insurance services for the victims.

The environmental cost was almost as high as the human toll. In 1984 the 159 million cars, trucks, and buses on the nation’s roads were guzzling millions of barrels of oil every day, causing traffic jams that shattered nerves and clogged the cities they were supposed to open up and turning much of the countryside to pavement. Not surprisingly, when gasoline shortages created long lines at the pumps in 1974 and 1979, behavioral scientists noted that many people experienced anger, depression, frustration, and insecurity, as well as a formidable sense of loss.¹

Such reactions were possible because the automobile and the suburb have combined to create a drive-in culture that is part of the daily experience of most Americans. Because of unemployment and war, per capita motor-vehicle ownership was stable (at about 30 million vehicles) between 1930 and 1948, and as late as 1950 (when registrations had jumped to 49 million) an astonishing 41 percent of all American families and a majority of working-class families still did not own a car. Postwar prosperity and rising real wages, however, made possible vastly higher market penetration, and by 1984 there were about seventy motor vehicles for every one hundred citizens, and more cars than either households or workers. Schaeffer and Sclar have argued that high auto ownership is the result of real economic needs rather than some “love affair” with private transportation. Moreover, the American people have proven to be no more prone to motor vehicle purchases than the citizens of other lands. After World War II, the Europeans and the Japanese began to catch up, and by 1980 both had achieved the same level of automobile ownership that the United States had reached in 1950. In automotive technology, American dominance slipped away in the postwar years as German, Swedish, and Japanese engineers pioneered the development of diesel engines, front-wheel drives, disc brakes, fuel-injection, and rotary engines.²

Although it is not accurate to speak of a uniquely American love affair with the automobile, and although John B. Rae claimed too much when he wrote in 1971 that “modern suburbia is a creature of the automobile and could not exist without it,” the motor vehicle has funda-
mentally restructured the pattern of everyday life in the United States. As a young man, Lewis Mumford advised his countrymen to "forget the damned motor car and build cities for lovers and friends." As it was, of course, the nation followed a different pattern. Writing in the *American Builder* in 1929, the critic Willard Morgan noted that the building of drive-in structures to serve a motor-driven population had ushered in "a completely new architectural form."  

**The Interstate Highway**

The most popular exhibit at the New York World’s Fair in 1933 was General Motors’ "Futurama." Looking twenty-five years ahead, it offered a "magic Aladdin-like flight through time and space." Fair-goers stood in hour-long lines, waiting to travel on a moving sidewalk above a huge model created by designer Norman Bel Geddes. Miniature superhighways with 50,000 automated cars wove past model farms en route to model cities. Five million persons peered eventually at such novelties as elevated freeways, expressway traffic moving at 100 miles per hour, and "modern and efficient city planning—breath-taking architecture—each city block a complete unit in itself (with) broad, one-way thoroughfares—space, sunshine, light, and air." The message of "Futurama" was as impressive as its millions of model parts: "The job of building the future is one which will demand our best energies, our most fruitful imagination; and that with it will come greater opportunities for all."  

The promise of a national system of impressive roadways attracted a diverse group of lobbyists, including the Automobile Manufacturers Association, state-highway administrators, motor-bus operators, the American Trucking Association, and even the American Parking Association—for the more cars on the road, the more cars would be parked at the end of the journey. Truck companies, for example, promoted legislation to spend state gasoline taxes on highways, rather than on schools, hospitals, welfare, or public transit. In 1943 these groups came together as the American Road Builders Association, with General Motors as the largest contributor, to form a lobbying enterprise second only to that of the munitions industry. By the mid-1950s, it had become one of the most broad-based of all pressure groups, consisting of the oil, rubber, asphalt, and construction industries; the car dealers and renters; the trucking and bus concerns; the banks and advertising agencies that depended upon the companies involved; and the labor unions. On the local level, professional real-estate groups and home-builders associations joined the
movement in the hope that highways would cause a spurt in housing turnover and a jump in prices. They envisaged no mere widening of existing roads, but the creation of an entirely new superhighway system and the initiation of the largest peacetime construction project in history.\(^5\)

The highway lobby inaugurated a comprehensive public relations program in 1953 by sponsoring a national essay contest on the need for better roads. The winner of the $25,000 grand prize was Robert Moses, the greatest builder the world has yet known and a passionate advocate of the urban expressway. The title of his work was “How to Plan and Pay for Better Highways.” As his biographer Robert A. Caro has noted, Moses was “the world’s most vocal, effective and prestigious apologist for the automobile,” and he did more than any other single urban official to encourage more hesitant officials to launch major road-building efforts in their cities.\(^6\)

The Cold War provided an additional stimulus to the campaign for more elaborate expressways. In 1951 the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists devoted an entire issue to “Defense through Decentralization.” Their argument was simple. To avoid national destruction in a nuclear attack, the United States should disperse existing large cities into smaller settlements. The ideal model was a depopulated urban core surrounded by satellite cities and low-density suburbs.

Sensitive to mounting political pressure, President Dwight Eisenhower appointed a committee in 1954 to “study” the nation’s highway requirements. Its conclusions were foregone, in part because the chairman was Lucius D. Clay, a member of the board of directors of General Motors. The committee considered no alternative to a massive highway system, and it suggested a major redirection of national policy to benefit the car and the truck. The Interstate Highway Act became law in 1956, when the Congress provided for a 41,000-mile (eventually expanded to a 42,500-mile) system, with the federal government paying 90 percent of the cost. President Eisenhower gave four reasons for signing the measure: current highways were unsafe; cars too often became snarled in traffic jams; poor roads saddled business with high costs for transportation; and modern highways were needed because “in case of atomic attack on our key cities, the road net must permit quick evacuation of target areas.” Not a single word was said about the impact of highways on cities and suburbs, although the concrete thoroughfares and the thirty-five-ton tractor-trailers which used them encouraged the continued outward movement of industries toward the beltways and interchanges. Moreover, the interstate system helped continue the downward spiral of public transportation and virtually guaranteed that future urban growth would perpetuate a centerless sprawl. Soon after the bill was passed by
the Senate, Lewis Mumford wrote sadly: "When the American people, through their Congress, voted a little while ago for a $26 billion highway program, the most charitable thing to assume is that they hadn't the faintest notion of what they were doing."

Once begun, the Interstate Highway System of the United States became a concrete colossus that grew bigger with every passing year. The secret of its success lay in the principle of non-divertibility of highway revenues collected from gasoline taxes. The Highway Trust Fund, as it was called, was to be held separately from general taxes. Although no less a personage than Winston Churchill called the idea of a non-divertible road fund "nonsense," "absurd," and "an outrage upon . . . common sense," the trust fund had powerful friends in the United States, and it easily swept all opposition before it. Unlike European governments, Washington used taxes to support the highway infrastructure while refusing assistance to railroads. According to Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin, 75 percent of government expenditures for transportation in the United States in the postwar generation went for highways as opposed to 1 percent for urban mass transit.7

The inevitable result of the bias in American transport funding, a bias that existed for a generation before the Interstate Highway program was initiated, is that the United States now has the world's best road system and very nearly its worst public-transit offerings. Los Angeles, in particular, provides the nation's most dramatic example of urban sprawl tailored to the mobility of the automobile. Its vast, amorphous conglomeration of housing tracts, shopping centers, industrial parks, freeways, and independent towns blend into each other in a seamless fabric of concrete and asphalt, and nothing over the years has succeeded in gluing this automobile-oriented civilization into any kind of cohesion—save that of individual routine. Los Angeles's basic shape comes from three factors, all of which long preceded the freeway system. The first was cheap land (in the 1920s rather than 1970s) and the desire for single-family houses. In 1950, for example, nearly two-thirds of all the dwelling units in the Los Angeles area were fully detached, a much higher percentage than in Chicago (28 percent), New York City (20 percent), or Philadelphia (15 percent), and its residential density was the lowest of major cities. The second was the dispersed location of its oil fields and refineries, which led to the creation of industrial suburbs like Whittier and Fullerton and of residential suburbs like La Habra, which housed oil workers and their families. The third was its once excellent mass-transit system, which at its peak included more than 1,100 miles of track and constituted the largest electric interurban railway in the world.8

The Pacific Electric Company collapsed in the 1920s, however, and
The close connection between road building and suburban growth is apparent in this 1922 photograph of Westwood outside of Los Angeles. The sign in the foreground announces the construction of a new 50-foot boulevard while the sign in the background proclaims the availability of residential sites. Courtesy Los Angeles Public Library.
One of the most striking characteristics of American cities is their broad streets and avenues, especially in comparison with the rather narrow thoroughfares which exist elsewhere in the world. This photograph of 24th Street in Brooklyn on March 24, 1925, shows the ample roadways that were typical in even the most populous of America’s great cities. The two lonely automobiles in this picture make it clear that the width of the street was not necessitated by heavy vehicular traffic, but rather by the ideal of spaciousness itself. Courtesy of the Municipal Archives, Department of Records and Information Services, City of New York.
The colonial-style American house, which traced its origins to the pre-Revolutionary period, became immensely popular after World War II, especially in the East, Middle West, and South. Its appeal derived partly from its spaciousness, partly from its suggestion of affluence, and partly from its symbolic connection to an earlier period. This photograph was taken on November 26, 1937, in the Cannon Hill Development of Huntington, Long Island, and it depicts a style that would dominate many suburban areas in the post-war period. Courtesy Samuel H. Gottscho Collection, Avery Architectural Library, Columbia University.

(Opposite) During the years between the two World Wars, the Country Club District in Kansas City was the nation’s most famous example of planned residential development. This view of Pembroke Lane just south of 56th Street was in the Mission Hills portion of the affluent community. Courtesy of J. C. Nichols Company.
Because it could carry many times the load of a horse-drawn wagon, the truck completely restructured the shape of the American metropolis by greatly stimulating the de-concentration of industry. This 1920 photograph shows how the D. L. Knight Moving Company of Louisville, Kentucky incorporated the new horseless technology into a business that required yearround operation. *Courtesy of the Caufield and Shook Collection, University of Louisville Photographic Archives.*
The first Holiday Inn opened on Summer Avenue in Memphis and featured rooms that were clean, affordable, and respectable. This 1952 view of the chain’s first “hotel court” shows the automobile orientation of the company. The large signs were intended to be easily visible from the highway and the rooms themselves were designed for easy access from the family car. Courtesy of Kemmons Wilson.

(Opposite) The garage has gone through many incarnations in its 75-year history, but only in California does the garage itself dominate the front façade of the typical home. This 1984 view of a house in Irvine shows how the driveway dominates the small front yard and how the two-car garage occupies two-thirds of the width of the entire residence.
The American service station began as an appendage to a general store or a livery stable and only gradually evolved into an all-purpose emporium where one could purchase gasoline, arrange for automotive repairs, and buy groceries. This New York City station at First Avenue and 124th Street in East Harlem is an example of the first generation of free-standing service stations, replete with a repair area and off-street pumps. The date is July 10, 1934. Courtesy of the Municipal Archives, Department of Records and Information Services, City of New York.
Country Club Plaza in Kansas City was one of the first planned shopping centers in the world. Designed by J. C. Nichols in the 1920s, it offered a mix of retailing and office functions. These photographs were taken in the earliest years of the plaza, but it continues to thrive in 1985. Courtesy of Bill Most photography and the J. C. Nichols Company.
The Poplar Plaza Shopping Center in Memphis, Tennessee, which opened in 1949, was one of the first off-street retailing complexes to be built after World War II. This 1952 aerial photograph reveals an important difference between the first generation of American shopping centers and those which were built after the mid 1950s. Notice, for example, that the stores are set back less than one hundred feet from the street, even though there was ample room for expansion at the top of the picture. This type of shopping center was rare after 1960, when the typical pattern was to center the stores in the midst of a vast parking lot. In fact, the Poplar Plaza Shopping Center itself later expanded toward the top left of the picture, and the number of parking spaces was expanded by several times. *Courtesy T. David Goodwin.*

(Opposite) Few cities anywhere could match Chicago's combination of subway, elevated, bus, and commuter railroad lines when this photograph was taken of Grant Park in the early 1950s. But the automobile presence was obviously important as central business district workers abandoned public transit for the convenience and privacy of the motorcar. *Courtesy of the National Archives.*
The main streets of most American communities, suburban and otherwise, are no longer along the familiar sidewalks of downtown areas. Instead, they are within the artificial environments of the indoor malls, which dot the American landscape in the 1980s and which are the new hangouts of the adolescent generation. This photograph of the interior of the Paramus Mall in New Jersey shows a typical sequence of retail shops.
The mobile home park concept was pioneered in the 1920s and 1930s, but the largest experiment with manufactured or prefabricated houses came in World War II. This 1945 aerial photograph was taken of a part of Oak Ridge, Tennessee, a community that had not even existed in 1940. In the next few years, as atomic workers poured into the area, more than 5,000 trailers supplemented 9,600 prefabricated houses and 16,000 barracks to provide temporary dwellings in this top-secret facility. 

*Courtesy of the Atomic Energy Commission.*
This 1984 photograph of the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California, depicts the extraordinary success of the Reverend Robert Schuller’s drive-in church concept. Although most worshippers can be accommodated within the glass-walled structure itself, many people continue to prefer the privacy of their personal automobiles. During the Reverend Schuller’s sermons, a great glass door swings open so that the drive-in communicants can have a direct view of their pastor.

(Opposite) The house on wheels has come a long way in appearance and in acceptability since trailer homes first developed in the years after World War I. Perhaps the most significant single advance has been an innovation called a “double wide,” which makes it possible to link two—or sometimes even three—mobile homes to create a structure that in its exterior dimensions resembles an ordinary “stick-built” house. This photograph of a double wide in Indiana in 1981 illustrates the desire of the “manufactured housing” industry to have its products accepted as normal, stationary, and permanent dwellings. Courtesy of Camilo J. Vergara.
The General Foods Corporation, which moved from Manhattan to White Plains, New York in 1954, was one of the first large American companies to move from a central city location to a suburban office park. This aerial view of the General Foods headquarters complex illustrates the basic ingredients of corporate flight—ample parking, abundant open space, and easily accessible highways. Courtesy of the General Foods Corporation.

(Opposite) No single symbol of America’s drive-in culture is more ubiquitous than the golden arches of McDonald’s hamburger stands. The formula of standardized menus, low prices, dependable quality, fast service, and easy road access was ultimately copied by dozens of imitators, but none were as successful or as widely recognized as the trademarks of the enormous chain.
The suburban corporate office park is already into its second generation, as this view of General Foods' new headquarters building attests. Opened in 1982 only a few miles from its 1954 complex (which General Foods continues to occupy), this architecturally distinguished edifice takes the bucolic image one step further than its predecessor, with a large reflecting lake along one side of the main building. Courtesy of the General Foods Corporation.
since that time Los Angeles has been more dependent upon the private automobile than other large American cities. Beginning in 1942, the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, the automobile club, and elected officials met regularly to plan for a region-wide expressway network. They succeeded, and southern California’s fabled 715 miles of freeways now constitute a grid that channels virtually all traffic and sets many communal boundaries. They are the primary form of transportation for most residents, who seem to regard time spent in their cars as more pleasurable than time walking to, waiting for, or riding on the bus. More than a third of the Los Angeles area is consumed by highways, parking lots, and interchanges, and in the downtown section this proportion rises to two-thirds. Not surprisingly, efforts to restore the region’s public transportation to excellence have thus far failed. In 1976, for example, the state of California attempted to discourage single-passenger automobiles by reserving one lane in each direction on the Santa Monica Freeway for express buses and car pools. An emotional explosion ensued that dominated radio talk shows and television news, and Los Angeles’ so-called “diamond lanes” were soon abolished. 

More recently, southern California has followed the growing national enthusiasm for rail transit, and Los Angeles broke ground in 1984 for an 18-mile, $3.3 billion subway that will cut underneath the densely built, heavily trafficked Wilshire Boulevard corridor, cut through Hollywood, and end up in the residential San Fernando Valley. The underground will hopefully be the centerpiece of an eventual 160-mile network, second in size in the United States only to New York City’s.

—The Garage

The drive-in structure that is closest to the hearts, bodies, and cars of the American family is the garage. It is the link between the home and the outside world. The word is French, meaning storage space, but its transformation into a multi-purpose enclosure internally integrated with the dwelling is distinctively American.

In the streetcar era, curbs had been unbroken and driveways were almost unknown. A family wealthy enough to have a horse and carriage would have stored such possessions either in a public livery stable or in a private structure at the rear of the property. The owners of the first automobiles were usually sufficiently affluent to maintain a private stable. The first cars, therefore, which were open to the elements, often found lodging in a corner of the stable, side by side with the carriages they were soon to replace. These early accommodations for the auto-
mobile were often provided with gasoline tanks, for filling stations at the time were few and far between. This and the fact that cars often caught fire were good and sufficient reasons to keep the motor vehicles away from the family.10

After World War I, house plans of the expensive variety began to include garages, and by the mid-1920s driveways were commonplace and garages had become important selling points. The popular 1928 Home Builders pattern book offered designs for fifty garages in wood, Tudor, and brick varieties. In affluent sections, such large and efficiently planned structures included housing above for the family chauffeur. In less pretentious neighborhoods, the small, single-purpose garages were scarcely larger than the vehicles themselves, and they were simply portable and prefabricated structures, similar to those in Quebec today, that were camouflaged with greenery and trellises. As one architect complained in 1924: “The majority of owners are really ashamed of their garages and really endeavor to keep them from view,” and he implored his readers to build a garage “that may be worthy of standing alongside your house.” Although there was a tendency to move garages closer to the house, they typically remained at the rear of the property before 1925, often with access via an alley which ran parallel to the street. The car was still thought of as something similar to a horse—dependable and important, but not something that one needed to be close to in the evening.11

By 1935, however, the garage was beginning to merge into the house itself, and in 1937 the Architectural Record noted that “the garage has become a very essential part of the residence.” The tendency accelerated after World War II, as alleys went the way of the horse-drawn wagon, as property widths more often exceeded fifty feet, and as the car became not only a status symbol, but almost a member of the family, to be cared for and sheltered. The introduction of a canopied and unenclosed structure called a “car port” represented an inexpensive solution to the problem, particularly in mild climates, but in the 1950s the enclosed garage was back in favor and a necessity even in a tract house. Easy access to the automobile became a key aspect of residential design, and not only for the well-to-do. By the 1960s garages often occupied about 400 square feet (about one-third of the house itself) and usually contained space for two automobiles and a variety of lawn and woodworking tools. Offering direct access to the house (a conveniently placed door usually led directly into the kitchen), the garage had become an integrated part of the dwelling, and it dominated the front facades of new houses. In California garages and driveways were often so prominent that the house could almost be described as accessory to the garage. Few people, however, went to the extremes common in En-
gland, where the automobile was often so precious that living rooms were often converted to garages.12

The Motel

As the United States became a rubber-tire civilization, a new kind of roadside architecture was created to convey an instantly recognizable image to the fast-moving traveler. Criticized as tasteless, cheap, forgettable, and flimsy by most commentators, drive-in structures did attract the attention of some talented architects, most notably Los Angeles's Richard Neutra. For him, the automobile symbolized modernity, and its design paralleled his own ideals of precision and efficiency. This correlation between the structure and the car began to be celebrated in the late 1960s and 1970s when architects Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour developed such concepts as "architecture as symbol" and the "architecture of communication." Their book, Learning From Las Vegas, was instrumental in encouraging a shift in taste from general condemnation to appreciation of the commercial strip and especially of the huge and garish signs which were easily recognized by passing motorists.13

A ubiquitous example of the drive-in culture is the motel. In the middle of the nineteenth century, every city, every county seat, every aspiring mining town, every wide place in the road with aspirations to larger size, had to have a hotel. Whether such structures were grand palaces on the order of Boston's Tremont House or New York's Fifth Avenue Hotel, or whether they were jerry-built shacks, they were typically located at the center of the business district, at the focal point of community activities. To a considerable extent, the hotel was the place for informal social interaction and business, and the very heart and soul of the city.14

Between 1910 and 1920, however, increasing numbers of traveling motorists created a market for overnight accommodation along the highways. The first tourists simply camped wherever they chose along the road. By 1924, several thousand municipal campgrounds were opened which offered cold water spigots and outdoor privies. Next came the "cabin camps," which consisted of tiny, white clapboard cottages arranged in a semicircle and often set in a grove of trees. Initially called "tourist courts," these establishments were cheap, convenient, and informal, and by 1926 there were an estimated two thousand of them, mostly in the West and in Florida.

Soon after clean linens and comfortable rooms became available along
the nation’s highways, it became apparent that overnight travelers were not the only, or even the largest, pool of customers. Convenience and privacy were especially appealing to couples seeking a romantic retreat. A well-publicized Southern Methodist University study in 1935 reported that 75 percent of Dallas area motel business consisted of one man and one woman remaining for only a short stay. Whatever the motivation of patrons, the success of the new-style hotels prompted Sinclair Lewis to predict in 1920:

Somewhere in these states there is a young man who is going to become rich. He is going to start a chain of small, clean, pleasant hotels, standardized and nationally advertised, along every important motor route in the country. He is not going to waste money on glit and onyx, but he is going to have agreeable clerks, good coffee, endurable mattresses and good lighting.¹⁵

It was not until 1952 that Kemmons Wilson and Wallace E. Johnson opened their first ‘‘Holiday Inn’’ on Summer Avenue in Memphis. But long before that, in 1926, a San Luis Obispo, California, proprietor had coined a new word, ‘‘motel,’’ to describe an establishment that allowed a guest to park his car just outside his room. New terminology did not immediately erase the unsavory image of the roadside establishments, however. In 1940 FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover declared that most motels were assignation camps and hideouts for criminals. Perhaps he was thinking of Bonnie and Clyde, who had a brief encounter with the law at the Red Crown Cabin Camp near Platte City, Missouri, one evening in July of 1933. Many of Hoover’s ‘‘dens of vice’’ were once decent places that, unable to keep up, turned to the ‘‘hot pillow trade.’’ Some Texas cabins, said the FBI director, were rented as many as sixteen times a night, while establishments elsewhere did business by the hour, with ‘‘a knock on the door when the hour was up.’’¹⁶

Motels began to thrive after World War II, when the typical establishment was larger and more expensive than the earlier cabins. Major chains set standards for prices, services, and respectability that the traveling public could depend on. As early as 1948, there were 26,000 self-styled motels in the United States. Hard-won respectability attracted more middle-class families, and by 1960 there were 60,000 such places, a figure that doubled again by 1972. By that time an old hotel was closing somewhere in downtown America every thirty hours. And somewhere in suburban America, a plastic and glass Shangri La was rising to take its place.¹⁷

Typical of the inner-city hotels was the Heritage in Detroit. The big
bands once played on its roof, and aspiring socialites enjoyed crepe-thin pancakes. In 1975 a disillusioned former employee gestured futilely, "It's dying; the whole place is dying," as the famed hotel closed its doors. By 1984 about fifty historic establishments in downtown areas, such as the Peabody in Memphis, the Mayflower in Washington, the Galvez in Houston, the Menger in San Antonio, and the Biltmore in Providence were reopening with antique-filled rooms and oak-paneled bars. But the trend remained with the standard, two-story motel.18

**The Drive-in Theater**

The downtown movie theaters and old vaudeville houses faced a similar challenge from the automobile. In 1933 Richard M. Hollinshead set up a 16-mm projector in front of his garage in Riverton, New Jersey, and then settled down to watch a movie. Recognizing a nation addicted to the motorcar when he saw one, Hollinshead and Willis Smith opened the world's first drive-in movie in a forty-car parking lot in Camden on June 6, 1933. Hollinshead profited only slightly from his brainchild, however, because in 1938 the United States Supreme Court refused to hear his appeal against Loew's Theaters, thus accepting the argument that the drive-in movie was not a patentable item. The idea never caught on in Europe, but by 1958 more than four thousand outdoor screens dotted the American landscape. Because drive-ins offered bargain-basement prices and double or triple bills, the theaters tended to favor movies that were either second-run or second-rate. Horror films and teenage romance were the order of the night, as *Beach Blanket Bingo* or *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* typified the offerings. Pundits often commented that there was a better show in the cars than on the screen.19

In the 1960s and 1970s the drive-in movie began to slip in popularity. Rising fuel costs and a season that lasted only six months contributed to the problem, but skyrocketing land values were the main factor. When drive-ins were originally opened, they were typically out in the hinterlands. When subdivisions and shopping malls came closer, the drive-ins could not match the potential returns from other forms of investments. According to the National Association of Theater Owners, only 2,935 open-air theaters still operated in the United States in 1983, even though the total number of commercial movie screens in the nation, 18,772, was at a 35-year high. The increase was picked up not by the downtown and the neighborhood theaters, but by new multi-screen cinemas in shopping centers. Realizing that the large parking lots of indoor malls
were relatively empty in the evening, shopping center moguls came to regard theaters as an important part of a successful retailing mix.\textsuperscript{20}

\textbf{The Gasoline Service Station}

The purchase of gasoline in the United States has thus far passed through five distinct epochs. The first stage was clearly the worst for the motorist, who had to buy fuel by the bucketful at a livery stable, repair shop, or dry goods store. Occasionally, vendors sold gasoline from small tank cars which they pushed up and down the streets. In any event, the automobile owner had to pour gasoline from a bucket through a funnel into his tank. The entire procedure was inefficient, smelly, wasteful, and occasionally dangerous.\textsuperscript{21}

The second stage began about 1905, when C. H. Laessig of St. Louis equipped a hot-water heater with a glass gauge and a garden hose and turned the whole thing on its end. With this simple maneuver, he invented an easy way to transfer gasoline from a storage tank to an automobile without using a bucket. Later in the same year, Sylvanus F. Bowser invented a gasoline pump which automatically measured the outflow. The entire assembly was labeled a "filling station." At this stage, which lasted until about 1920, such an apparatus consisted of a single pump outside a retail store which was primarily engaged in other businesses and which provided precious few services for the motorist. Many were located on the edge of town for safety and to be near the bulk stations; those few stations in the heart of the city did not even afford the luxury of off-street parking.

Between 1920 and 1950, service stations entered into a third phase and became, as a group, one of the most widespread kinds of commercial buildings in the United States. Providing under one roof all the functions of gasoline distribution and normal automotive maintenance, these full-service structures were often built in the form of little colonial houses, Greek temples, Chinese pagodas, and Art Deco palaces. Many were local landmarks and a source of community pride. One cartoonist in the 1920s mocked such structures with a drawing in which a newcomer to town confused the gas station with the state capitol. Grandiose at the time, many of them molder today—deserted, forlorn structures with weeds growing in the concrete where gasoline pumps once stood. Their bays stand empty and silent, rendered that way by changing economics, changing styles, and changing consumer preferences.

After 1935 the gasoline station evolved again, this time into a more homogeneous entity that was standardized across the entire country and
that reflected the mass-marketing techniques of billion-dollar oil companies. Some of the more familiar designs were innovative or memorable, such as the drumlike Mobil station by New York architect Frederick Frost, which featured a dramatically curving facade while conveying the corporate identity. Another popular service station style was the Texaco design of Walter Dorwin Teague—a smooth white exterior with elegant trim and the familiar red star and bold red lettering. Whatever the product or design, the stations tended to be operated by a single entrepreneur and represented an important part of small business in American life.

The fifth stage of gasoline-station development began in the 1970s, with the slow demise of the traditional service-station businessman. New gasoline outlets were of two types. The first was the super station, often owned and operated by the oil companies themselves. Most featured a combination of self-service and full-service pumping consoles, as well as fully equipped “car care centers.” Service areas were separated from the pumping sections so that the two functions would not interfere with each other. Mechanics never broke off work to sell gas.

The more pervasive second type might be termed the “mini-mart station.” The operators of such establishments have now gone full circle since the early twentieth century. Typically, they know nothing about automobiles and expect the customers themselves to pump the gasoline. Thus, “the man who wears the star” has given way to the teenager who sells six-packs, bags of ice, and pre-prepared sandwiches.22

The Shopping Center

Large-scale retailing, long associated with central business districts, began moving away from the urban cores between the world wars. The first experiments to capture the growing suburban retail markets were made by major department stores in New York and Chicago in the 1920s, with Robert E. Wood, Sears’s vice president in charge of factories and retail stores, as the leader of the movement. A student of population trends, Wood decided in 1925 that motor-vehicle registrations had outstripped the parking space available in metropolitan cores, and he insisted that Sears’s new “A” stores (their other retail outlets were much smaller) be located in low-density areas which would offer the advantages of lower rentals and yet, because of the automobile, be within reach of potential customers. With the exception of Sears’s flagship store on State Street in Chicago (which was itself closed in 1983), Wood’s dictum of ample free parking was rigorously followed throughout the United States. Early examples of the formula were the Pico Boulevard store in
Los Angeles and the Crosstown store in Memphis. A revolution in retailing followed. Writing in the *American Builder* in 1929, the critic Willard Morgan found it natural that traffic congestion at the center would drive thousands of prospective customers to turn instead to suburban marketing centers.  

Another threat to the primacy of the central business district was the "string street" or "shopping strip," which emerged in the 1920s and which were designed to serve vehicular rather than pedestrian traffic. These bypass roads encouraged city dwellers with cars to patronize businesses on the outskirts of town. Short parades of shops could already have been found near the streetcar and rapid transit stops, but, as has been noted, these new retailing thoroughfares generally radiated out from the city business district toward low-density, residential areas, functionally dominating the urban street system. They were the prototypes for the familiar highway strips of the 1980s which stretch far into the countryside.

Sears's big stores were initially isolated from other stores, while the retail establishments of highway strips were rarely unified into a coordinated whole. The multiple-store shopping center with free, off-street parking represented the ultimate retail adaptation to the requirements of automobility. Although the *Guinness Book of World Records* lists the Roland Park Shopping Center (1896) as the world's first shopping center, the first of the modern variety was Country Club Plaza in Kansas City. It was the effort of a single entrepreneur, Jesse Clyde Nichols, who put together a concentration of retail stores, and used leasing policy to determine the composition of stores in the concentration. By doing that, Nichols created the idea of the planned regional shopping center.  

Begun in 1923 in a Spanish-Moorish style with red tile roofs and little towers—its Giralda Tower is actually a replica of the original in Seville—Country Club Plaza featured waterfalls, fountains, flowers, tree-lined walks, and expensive landscaping. As the first automobile-oriented shopping center, it offered extensive parking lots behind ornamented brick walls. Most buildings were two stories high, with the second-floor offices typically occupied by physicians, dentists, and attorneys, whose presence would help stimulate a constant flow of well-heeled visitors. An enormous commercial success, Country Club Plaza stood in organic harmony with the prairie surroundings, and it soon became the hub of Kansas City's business and cultural activities.

Nichols's Country Club Plaza generated considerable favorable publicity after it became fully operational in 1925, and by the mid-1930s the concept of the planned shopping center, as a concentration of a number of businesses under one management and with convenient parking facilities, was well known and was recognized as the best method of
serving the growing market of drive-in customers. But the Great Depression and World War II had a chilling effect on private construction, and as late as 1946 there were only eight shopping centers in the entire United States. They included Upper Darby Center in West Philadelphia (1927); Suburban Square in Ardmore, Pennsylvania (1928); Highland Park Shopping Village outside Dallas (1931); River Oaks in Houston (1937); Hampton Village in St. Louis (1941); Colony in Toledo (1944); Shirlington in Arlington, Virginia (1944); and Bellevue Square in Seattle (1946). Importantly, however, they provided many of the amenities that shoppers would take for granted half a century later. In 1931, for example, Highland Park Village outside Dallas offered department, drug, and food stores, as well as banks, a theater, beauty and barber shops, offices, studios, and parking for several hundred cars. The Spanish architecture was uniform throughout, and the rental charge included a maintenance fee to ensure that the property was adequately cared for during the term of the lease. 26

The first major planned retail shopping center in the world went up in Raleigh, North Carolina in 1949, the brainchild of Homer Hoyt, a well-known author and demographer best known for his sector model of urban growth. Thereafter, the shopping-center idea caught on rapidly in the United States and less rapidly in Canada, where the first shopping center—Dixie Plaza near Toronto—did not open until 1954. The most successful early examples, such as Poplar Plaza in Memphis, offered at least thirty retail small retailers, one large department store, and parking for five hundred or more cars. By 1984 the nation’s 20,000 large shopping centers accounted for almost two-thirds of all retail trade, and even in relatively centralized cities like New York, Boston, and San Francisco downtown merchants adapted to the suburban shift. Easy facilities for parking gave such collections of stores decisive advantages over central city establishments. 27

The concept of the enclosed, climate-controlled mall, first introduced at the Southdale Shopping Center near Minneapolis in 1956, added to the suburban advantage. A few of the indoor malls, such as the mammoth Midtown Plaza in Rochester, New York, were located downtown, but more typical were Paramus Park and Bergen Mall in New Jersey; Woodfield Mall in Schaumburg outside Chicago; King’s Plaza and Cross County outside Gotham; and Raleigh Mall in Memphis—all of which were located on outlying highways and all of which attracted shoppers from trading areas of a hundred square miles and more. Edward J. Bartolo, Sr., a self-made millionaire and workaholic, operated from a base in Youngstown, Ohio, to become the most prominent mall developer in the United States, but large insurance companies, especially the Equi-
table Life Assurance Society, increasingly sought high yields as shopping-center landlords.

During the 1970s, a new phenomenon—the super regional mall—added a more elaborate twist to suburban shopping. Prototypical of the new breed was Tyson’s Corner, on the Washington Beltway in Fairfax County, Virginia. Anchored by Bloomingdale’s, it did over $165 million in business in 1983 and provided employment to more than 14,000 persons. Even larger was Long Island’s Roosevelt Field, a 180-store, 2.2 million square foot mega-mall that attracted 275,000 visitors a week and did $230 million in business in 1980. Most elaborate of all was Houston’s Galleria, a world-famed setting for 240 prestigious boutiques, a quartet of cinemas, 26 restaurants, an olympic-sized ice-skating pavilion, and two luxury hotels. There were few windows in these mausoleums of merchandising, and clocks were rarely seen—just as in gambling casinos.²⁸

Boosters of such mega-malls argue that they are taking the place of the old central business districts and becoming the identifiable collecting points for the rootless families of the newer areas. As weekend and afternoon attractions, they have a special lure for teenagers, who often go there on shopping dates or to see the opposite sex. As one official noted in 1971: “These malls are now their street corners. The new shopping centers have killed the little merchant, closed most movies, and are now supplanting the older shopping centers in the suburbs.” They are also especially attractive to mothers with young children and to the elderly, many of whom visit regularly to get out of the house without having to worry about crime or inclement weather.²⁹

In reality, even the largest malls are almost the opposite of downtown areas because they are self-contained and because they impose a uniformity of tastes and interests. They cater exclusively to middle-class tastes and contain no unsavory bars or pornography shops, no threatening-looking characters, no litter, no rain, and no excessive heat or cold. As Anthony Zube-Jackson has noted, their emphasis on cleanliness and safety is symptomatic of a very lopsided view of urban culture.

Despite their blandness, the shopping malls and the drive-in culture of which they are a part have clearly eclipsed the traditional central business districts, and in many medium-sized cities the last of the downtown department stores has already closed. The drive-in blight that killed them, like the Dutch Elm disease that ravaged Eastern towns in years past, has played hopscotch from one town to another, bringing down institutions that had once appeared invincible. The targets of this scourge, however, were not trees, but businesses, specifically the once-mighty department stores that anchored many a Main Street.

The most famous retailing victim of the drive-in culture thus far has
been the stately J. L. Hudson Company of Detroit. It was a simple fact that all roads in the Motor City led to Hudson's. Featuring tall chandeliers, wood-paneled corridors, and brass-buttoned doormen, the 25-story, full-square-block emporium at its height ranked with Macy's in New York and Marshall Field in Chicago as one of the country's three largest stores. After 1950, however, the once-proud store was choked by its own branches, all of them in outlying shopping centers. As soon as Hudson's opened Northland, its biggest suburban outlet and one of the earliest in the nation, sales downtown began to fall. They declined from a peak in 1953 of $153 million to $45 million in 1981. Finally, in 1981, the downtown landmark closed its doors for good. Hudson's was a victim of the product that made Detroit: the car.

In a Christmastime obituary for Detroit's most famous retailer, a WWJ radio commentator maintained that white flight to the suburbs, hastened by the Motor City's 1967 race riot, helped deal Hudson's a mortal blow. Actually, the 91-year-old store was killed by the free parking, easy accessibility, and controlled environment of the mega-malls.

By the 1960s, the primary rival to the shopping center as the locus of brief, informal communication and interaction had become the highway strip, with its flashing neon signs and tacky automobile showrooms. Especially in medium-sized cities, the vitality after dark is concentrated in the shopping malls or along the highway, not along Main Street.

The House Trailer and Mobile Home

The phenomenon of a nation on wheels is perhaps best symbolized by the uniquely American development of the mobile home. "Trailers are here to stay," predicted the writer Howard O'Brien in 1936. Although in its infancy at that time, the mobile-home industry has flourished in the United States. The house trailer itself came into existence in the teens of this century as an individually designed variation on a truck or a car, and it began to be produced commercially in the 1920s. Originally, trailers were designed to travel, and they were used primarily for vacation purposes. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, however, many people, especially salesmen, entertainers, construction workers, and farm laborers, were forced into a nomadic way of life as they searched for work, any work. They found that these temporary trailers on rubber tires provided the necessary shelter while also meeting their economic and migratory requirements. Meanwhile, Wally Byam and other designers were streamlining the mobile home into the classic tear-drop form made famous by Airstream.
During World War II, the United States government got into the act by purchasing tens of thousands of trailers for war workers and by forbidding their sale to the general public. By 1943 the National Housing Agency alone owned 35,000 of the aluminum boxes, and more than 60 percent of the nation's 200,000 mobile homes were in defense areas. The government also built prefabricated homes without wheels near weapons factories. The ticky-tacky quality of these prefabricated shanty towns gave prefabs a lingering bad image, which remained after the war, when trailers found a growing market among migratory farm workers and military personnel, both of whom had to move frequently.

Not until the mid-1950s did the term "mobile home" begin to refer to a place where respectable people could marry, mature, and die. By then it was less a "mobile" than a "manufactured" home. No longer a trailer, it became a modern industrialized residence with almost all the accoutrements of a normal house. By the late 1950s, widths were increased to ten feet, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) began to recognize the mobile home as a type of housing suitable for mortgage insurance, and the maturities on sales contracts were increased from three to five years.

In the 1960s, twelve-foot widths were introduced, and then fourteen, and manufacturers began to add fireplaces, skylights, and cathedral ceilings. In 1967 two trailers were attached side by side to form the first "double wide." These new dimensions allowed for a greater variety of room arrangement and became particularly attractive to retired persons with fixed incomes. They also made the homes less mobile. By 1979 even the single-width "trailer" could be seventeen feet wide (by about sixty feet long), and according to the Manufactured Housing Institute, fewer than 2 percent were ever being moved from their original site. Partly as a result of this increasing permanence, individual communities and the courts began to define the structures as real property and thus subject to real-estate taxes rather than as motor vehicles subject only to license fees.32

Although it continued to be popularly perceived as a shabby substitute for "stick" housing (a derogatory word used to describe the ordinary American balloon-frame dwelling), the residence on wheels reflected American values and industrial practices. Built with easily machined and processed materials, such as sheet metal and plastic, it represented a total consumer package, complete with interior furnishings, carpets, and appliances. More importantly, it provided a suburban type alternative to the inner-city housing that would otherwise have been available to blue-collar workers, newly married couples, and retired persons. After 1965 the production of factory-made housing (the term preferred by the in-
The Drive-In Culture of Contemporary America

Driveways (and) rarely fell below 200,000 per year, and in Florida, Wyoming, and Montana they typically accounted for more than a quarter of all new housing units. By 1979 manufactured housing was a $3.1 billion industry, and the nation counted more than ten million mobile-home dwellers. These figures exclude the “motor homes” made popular by Winnebago in the 1970s, the modular homes that are built on a floor system like a conventional house, and the prefabricated houses for which parts are built in a factory and shipped in sections to be assembled on the site.33

A Drive-in Society

Drive-in motels, drive-in movies, and drive-in shopping facilities were only a few of the many new institutions that followed in the exhaust of the internal-combustion engine. By 1984 mom-and-pop grocery stores had given way almost everywhere to supermarkets, most banks had drive-in windows, and a few funeral homes were making it possible for mourners to view the deceased, sign the register, and pay their respects without emerging from their cars. Odessa Community College in Texas even opened a drive-through registration window.

Particularly pervasive were fast-food franchises, which not only decimated the family-style restaurants but cut deeply into grocery store sales. In 1915 James G. Huneker, a raconteur whose tales of early twentieth-century American life were compiled as New Cosmopolis, complained of the infusion of cheap, quick-fire “food hells,” and of the replacement of relaxed dining with “canned music and automatic lunch taverns.” With the automobile came the notion of “grabbing” something to eat. The first drive-in restaurant, Royce Hailey’s Pig Stand, opened in Dallas in 1921, and later in the decade, the first fast-food franchise, “White Tower,” decided that families touring in motorcars needed convenient meals along the way. The places had to look clean, so they were painted white. They had to be familiar, so a minimal menu was standardized at every outlet. To catch the eye, they were built like little castles, replete with fake ramparts and turrets. And to forestall any problem with a land lease, the little white castles were built to be moveable.

The biggest restaurant operation of all began in 1954, when Ray A. Kroc, a Chicago area milkshake-machine salesman, joined forces with Richard and Maurice McDonald, the owners of a fast-food emporium in San Bernardino, California. In 1955 the first of Mr. Kroc’s “McDonald’s” outlets was opened in Des Plaines, a Chicago suburb long famous as the site of an annual Methodist encampment. The second and third, both in
California, opened later in 1955. Within five years, there were 228 golden arches drive-ins selling hamburgers for 15 cents, french fries for 10 cents, and milkshakes for 20 cents. In 1961 Kroc bought out the McDonald brothers, and in the next twenty years this son of an unsuccessful realtor whose family came from Bohemia built an empire of 7,500 outlets and amassed a family fortune in excess of $500 million. Appropriately headquartered in suburban Oak Brook, Illinois, the McDonald’s enterprise is based on free parking and drive-in access, and its methods have been copied by dozens of imitators. Late in 1984, on an interstate highway north of Minneapolis, McDonald’s began construction of the most complete drive-in complex in the world. To be called McStop, it will feature a motel, gas station, convenience store, and, of course, a McDonald’s restaurant.34

Even church pews occasionally were replaced by the automobile. In early 1955, in suburban Garden Grove, California, the Reverend Robert Schuller, a member of the Reformed Church in America, began his ministry on a shoestring. With no sanctuary and virtually no money, he rented the Orange Drive-In movie theater on Sunday mornings and delivered his sermons while standing on top of the concession stand. The parishioners listened through speakers available at each parking space. What began as a necessity became a virtue when Schuller began attracting communicants who were more comfortable and receptive in their vehicles than in a pew. Word of the experiment—“Worship as you are . . . In the family car”—spread, the congregation grew, and in 1956 Schuller constructed a modest edifice for indoor services and administrative needs. But the Drive-in Church, as it was then called, continued to offer religious inspiration for automobile-bound parishioners, and in succeeding sanctuaries facilities were always included for those who did not want a “walk-in” church. By 1960 he had six thousand members in his church, and architect Richard Neutra had designed a huge, star-shaped “Tower of Power,” situated appropriately on twenty-two acres just past Disneyland on the Santa Ana Freeway. It looked like and was called “a shopping center for Jesus Christ.” 35

In 1980 a “Crystal Cathedral” was dedicated on the grounds. Designed by Philip Johnson, the $26 million structure is one of the most impressive and gargantuan religious buildings on earth. More than 125 feet high and 415 feet wide, its interior is a stunning cavern without columns, clad in over 10,000 panes of transparent glass. Yet the drive-in feature remains. Instead of separate services for his indoor and outdoor followers, Schuller broadcasts his message over the radio from an indoor/outdoor pulpit. At the beginning of each session, two 90-foot glass walls swing open so that the minister can be seen by drive-in worship-
pers. Traditionalists come inside the 3,000-seat "Crystal Cathedral," while those who remain in the "pews from Detroit" are directed to the announcement: "If you have a car radio, please turn to 540 on your dial for this service. If you do not have a radio, please park by the amplifiers in the back row." The appeal has been enormously successful. By 1984 Schuller's Garden Grove Community Church claimed to be the largest walk-in, drive-in church in the world. Its Sunday broadcasts were viewed by an estimated one million Californians and commanded the nation's highest ratings for religious programming.

**The Centerless City**

More than anyplace else, California became the symbol of the postwar suburban culture. It pioneered the booms in sports cars, foreign cars, vans, and motor homes, and by 1984 its 26 million citizens owned almost 19 million motor vehicles and had access to the world's most extensive freeway system. The result has been a new type of centerless city, best exemplified by once sleepy and out-of-the-way Orange County, just south and east of Los Angeles. After Walt Disney came down from Hollywood, bought out the ranchers, and opened Disneyland in 1955, Orange County began to evolve from a rural backwater into a suburb and then into a collection of medium and small towns. It had never had a true urban focus, in large part because its oil-producing sections each spawned independent suburban centers, none of which was particularly dominant over the others. The tradition continued when the area became a subdivider's dream in the 1960s and 1970s. By 1980 there were 26 Orange County cities, none with more than 225,000 residents. Like the begats of the Book of Genesis, they merged and multiplied into a huge agglomeration of two million people with its own Census Bureau metropolitan area designation—Anaheim, Santa Ana, Garden Grove. Unlike the traditional American metropolitan region, however, Orange County lacked a commutation focus, a place that could obviously be accepted as the center of local life. Instead, the experience of a local resident was typical: "I live in Garden Grove, work in Irvine, shop in Santa Ana, go to the dentist in Anaheim, my husband works in Long Beach, and I used to be the president of the League of Women Voters in Fullerton." 36

A centerless city also developed in Santa Clara County, which lies forty-five miles south of San Francisco and which is best known as the home of "'Silicon Valley.'" Stretching from Palo Alto on the north to the garlic and lettuce fields of Gilroy to the south, Santa Clara County
has the world’s most extensive concentration of electronics concerns. In 1940, however, it was best known for prunes and apricots, and it was not until after World War II that its largest city, San Jose, also became the nation’s largest suburb. With fewer than 70,000 residents in 1940, San Jose exploded to 636,000 by 1980, superseding San Francisco as the region’s largest municipality. As the automobile-based circulation system matured, the county’s spacious orchards were easily developed, and bulldozers uprooted fruit trees for shopping centers and streets. Home builders, encouraged by a San Jose city government that annexed new territory at a rapid pace and borrowed heavily to build new utilities and schools on the fringes of town, moved farther and farther into the rural outskirts. Dozens of semiconductor and aerospace companies expanded and built plants there. In time, this brought twice-daily ordeals of bumper-to-bumper traffic on congested freeways. The driving time of some six-mile commutes lengthened to forty-five minutes, and the hills grew hazy behind the smog. As Santa Clara County became a national symbol of the excesses of uncontrolled growth, its residents began to fear that the high-technology superstars were generating jobs and taxes, but that the jobs attracted more people, and the taxes failed to cover the costs of new roads, schools, sewers, and expanded police and fire departments.37

The numbers were larger in California, but the pattern was the same on the edges of every American city, from Buffalo Grove and Schaumburg near Chicago, to Germantown and Collierville near Memphis, to Creve Coeur and Ladue near St. Louis. And perhaps more important than the growing number of people living outside of city boundaries was the sheer physical sprawl of metropolitan areas. Between 1950 and 1970, the urbanized area of Washington, D.C., grew from 181 to 523 square miles, of Miami from 116 to 429, while in the larger megalopolises of New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, the region of settlement was measured in the thousands of square miles.

The Decentralization of Factories and Offices

The deconcentration of post-World War II American cities was not simply a matter of split-level homes and neighborhood schools. It involved almost every facet of national life, from manufacturing to shopping to professional services. Most importantly, it involved the location of the workplace, and the erosion of the concept of suburb as a place from which wage-earners commuted daily to jobs in the center. So far had the trend progressed by 1970 that in nine of the fifteen largest metro-
The Drive-In Culture of Contemporary America

politician areas suburbs were the principle sources of employment, and in some cities, like San Francisco, almost three-fourths of all work trips were by people who neither lived nor worked in the core city. In Wilmington, Delaware, 66 percent of area jobs in 1940 were in the core city; by 1970, the figure had fallen below one quarter. And despite the fact that Manhattan contained the world’s highest concentration of office space and business activity, in 1970, about 78 percent of the residents in the New York suburbs also worked in the suburbs. Many outlying communities thus achieved a kind of autonomy from the older downtown areas. A new “‘Americanism’” even entered the language—“‘beltway’”—to describe the broad expressways that encircled every important city by 1975 and that attracted employers of every description. 38

Manufacturing is now among the most dispersed of non-residential activities. As the proportion of industrial jobs in the United States work force fell from 29 percent to 23 percent of the total in the 1970s, those manufacturing enterprises that survived often relocated either to the suburbs or to the lower-cost South and West. Even tertiary industries, which do not utilize assembly-line processes and which require less flat space than larger factories, have adapted to the internal-combustion engine with peripheral sites. As early as 1963, industrial employment in the United States was more than half suburban based, and by 1981, about two-thirds of all manufacturing activity took place in the “‘industrial parks’” and new physical plants of the suburbs. The transition has been especially hard on older workshop cities, where venerable factories are abandoned as employers are lured outward by the promise of open land, easy access to interstate highways, and federal investment tax credits. Between 1970 and 1980, for example, Philadelphia lost 140,000 jobs, many of them with the closing down or moving away of such Quaker City mainstays as Philco-Ford, Cuneo Eastern Press, Midvale Heppenstall Steel, Bayuk Cigar, Eaton and Cooper Industries’ Plumb Tool Division, and the Container Corporation. 39

Office functions, once thought to be securely anchored to the streets of big cities, have followed the suburban trend. In the nineteenth century, businesses tried to keep all their operations under one centralized roof. It was the most efficient way to run a company when the mails were slow and uncertain and communication among employees was limited to the distance that a human voice could carry. More recently, the economics of real estate and a revolution in communications have changed these circumstances, and many companies are now balkanizing their accounting departments, data-processing divisions, and billing departments. Just as insurance companies, branch banks, regional sales staffs, and doctors offices have reduced their costs and presumably increased
their accessibility by moving to suburban locations, so also have back-office functions been splitting away from front offices and moving away from central business districts.

Corporate headquarters relocations have been particularly well-publicized. Although the publishing firm of Doubleday and Company moved to quiet Garden City on Long Island in 1910 and Reader's Digest shifted to Pleasantville, New York, in Westchester County in 1936, the overall trend of corporate movement was toward central business districts until about 1950. The outward trend began in earnest in 1954, when the General Foods Corporation moved its home office from midtown Manhattan to a spacious, low-slung campus surrounded by acres of trees and free parking in suburban White Plains. The exodus reached a peak between 1955 and 1980, when, arguing, "It's an altogether more pleasant way of life for all," more than fifty corporations, including such giants as International Business Machines, Gulf Oil, Texaco, Union Carbide, General Telephone, American Cyanamid, Xerox, Pepsico, U. S. Tobacco, Cheeseborough Ponds, Nestlé, American Can, Singer, Champion International, and Olin, abandoned their headquarters in New York City.¹⁰

Because Manhattan remained the dominant center of the nation's corporate and financial life, most companies simply moved within the region to more bucolic surroundings, principally in one of three small areas: a strip of central Westchester County from the Hudson River past White Plains to the Connecticut border, the downtown of Stamford and adjacent Greenwich in Fairfield County, Connecticut, and a narrow slice through the heartland of Morris and Somerset Counties in New Jersey. All three areas built more than 16 million square feet of office space between 1972 and 1985, or more than exists in all but a handful of American cities.

The trend was particularly strong toward Connecticut, where executives could have the benefit of Gotham's business and cultural advantages without the bother of New York State's income taxes. In 1960 when the first urban renewal plans were drawn up for downtown Stamford, no consideration was given to building any commercial office space there. In the next three decades, however, while the original proposals were delayed by community resistance, Stamford's urban-renewal plans were redrawn to reflect changes in corporate attitudes toward relocating out of Gotham and into more comfortable suburban locations. For Stamford the delay was beneficial. When companies began their Manhattan exodus, Stamford had available space downtown. By 1984 Fairfield County was the third leading corporate headquarters site in the United States, after only New York City and Chicago.
Several studies have pointed out that the most important variable in determining the direction of a corporate shift was the location of the home and country club of the chief executive officer of the particular company. In fact, top officers were often the only ones to benefit from the suburban shifts. When A & W Beverages made the move from Manhattan to White Plains early in 1984, the company lost its entire support staff in the transition and had to spend a small fortune on severance costs. “Some of these people had been with us for many years, so we had to ask ourselves what we should do with loyal and good workers who will no longer have a job,” said Craig Honeycutt, director of personnel for A & W, about the employees who quit rather than commute from Manhattan, Brooklyn, or New Jersey to White Plains.41

Because the construction of suburban office headquarters tends to be expensive, the purpose of most such moves is to improve employee morale and productivity as much as to reduce costs. To this end, a company typically hires a well-known architect to design a rustic complex on the model of a college campus or a self-contained village. Free parking and easy access to interstate highways presumably make possible a longer work day, while stone piazzas, landscaped gardens, impressive sculpture, and splashing water fountains, as well as gymnasiums, showers, and saunas presumably make possible a more relaxed one. Company-owned cafeterias replace the downtown restaurants, shopping districts, and even noontime concerts of the city centers. To some employees the result is “close to perfect.” Others find the campus environment boring and bemoan that “the main thing of interest out here is what’s new in the gift shop.”

Corporate relocation in the postwar period has been overwhelmingly a city-to-suburb phenomenon rather than a regional shift. The move of Gulf Oil to Houston and of American Airlines to Dallas, both from New York, were exceptions to this general rule. Only occasionally have large firms shifted both from a city to a suburb and from one region to another. The Johns-Manville Company, which transferred in the 1970s from a Manhattan office tower to a sleek and gleaming spaceship-style structure in the midst of a 10,000-acre ranch in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, is a clear exception. Perhaps coincidentally the Johns-Manville Corporation was saved from bankruptcy in 1982 only by the intervention of a court.

Since World War II, the American people have experienced a transformation of the man-made environment around them. Commercial, residential, and industrial structures have been redesigned to fit the needs of the motorist rather than the pedestrian. Garish signs, large parking
lots, one-way streets, drive-in windows, and throw-away fast-food buildings—all associated with the world of suburbia—have replaced the slower-paced, neighborhood-oriented institutions of an earlier generation. Some observers of the automobile revolution have argued that the car has created a new and better urban environment and that the change in spatial scale, based upon swift transportation, has formed a new kind of organic entity, speeding up personal communication and rendering obsolete the older urban settings. Lewis Mumford, writing from his small-town retreat in Amenia, New York, has emphatically disagreed. His prize-winning book, The City in History, was a celebration of the medieval community and an excoriation of "the formless urban exudation" that he saw American cities becoming. He noted that the automobile megalopolis was not a final stage in city development but an anticyc which "annihilates the city whenever it collides with it." 

The most damning indictment of private transportation remains, however, the 1958 work of the acid-tongued John Keats, The Insolent Chariots. He forcefully argued, as have others since that time, that highway engineers were wrong in constantly calling for more lanes of concrete to accommodate yet more lines of automobiles. Instead, Keats's position was that motorcars actually created the demand for more highways, which in turn increased the need for more vehicles, and so on ad infinitum. More ominously, he surmised, public expenditures for the automobile culture diverted funds from mass transit and needed social services.

The automobile lobby swept everything and everybody before it, however, and it was not until the first oil boycott of 1973 that Americans would seriously ponder the full implications of their drive-in culture. Especially in the 1950s, expressways represented progress and modernity, and mayors and public officials stumbled over themselves in seeking federal largesse for more and wider roads. Only a few people realized that high-speed roads accelerated deconcentration, displaced inner-city residents, contributed to the decay of central business districts, and hastened the deterioration of existing transportation systems. As Raymond Tucker, mayor of St. Louis and former president of the American Municipal Association, put it, "The plain fact of the matter is that we just cannot build enough lanes of highways to move all of our people by private automobile and create enough parking space to store the cars without completely paving over our cities and removing all of the . . . economic, social, and cultural establishments that the people were trying to reach in the first place."

Because structures built to accommodate the demands of the automobile are likely to have an ephemeral life, it is a mistake for cities to
duplicate suburban conditions. In 1973 a RAND study of St. Louis suggested as an alternative strategy that the city become "one of many large suburban centers of economic and residential life" rather than try to revive traditional central city functions. Such advice is for those who study statistics rather than cities. Too late, municipal leaders will realize than a slavish duplication of suburbia destroys the urban fabric that makes cities interesting. Memphis's Union Avenue, once a grand boulevard lined with the homes of the well-to-do, has recently fallen victim to the drive-in culture. In 1979 one of the last surviving landmarks, an elegant stone mansion, was leveled to make room for yet another fast-food outlet. Within three years, the plastic-and-glass hamburger emporium was bankrupt, but the scar on Union Avenue remained.

There are some signs that the halcyon days of the drive-in culture and automobile are behind us. More than one hundred thousand gasoline stations, or about one-third of the American total, have been eliminated in the last decade. Empty tourist courts and boarded-up motels are reminders that the fast pace of change can make commercial structures obsolete within a quarter-century of their erection. Even that suburban bellweather, the shopping center, which revolutionized merchandising after World War II, has come to seem small and out-of-date as newer covered malls attract both the trendy and the family trade. Some older centers have been recycled as bowling alleys or industrial buildings, and some have been remodeled to appeal to larger tenants and better-heeled customers. But others stand forlorn and boarded up. Similarly, the characteristic fast-food emporiums of the 1950s, with uniformed "car hops" who took orders at the automobile window, are now relics of the past. One of the survivors, Delores Drive-In, which opened in Beverly Hills in 1946, was recently proposed as an historic landmark, a sure sign that the species is in danger.44