

only 27 percent felt it was important to be "near houses of good friends"; over half disliked or were indifferent to neighbors being able to see in the house; and over half were indifferent or disliked being able to see the street from the inside of the house.<sup>30</sup>

With the construction of vast suburban tracts like Levittown, post-war builders set the pattern of suburban development for thirty years to come. We live with the results today, as Kenneth T. Jackson notes in *The Crabgrass Frontier*: "the life of the sidewalk and front yard has largely disappeared, and the social intercourse that used to be the main characteristic of urban life has vanished. Residential neighborhoods have become a mass of small, private islands, with the backyard functioning as a wholesome, family-oriented, and reclusive place."<sup>31</sup> A difficult question remains: did qualities inherent in the car cause Americans to retreat into their "private islands"? Jackson suggests that the "drive-in culture" is at the root of community decline in the suburbs. Yet any mention of a technological "culture" must not be limited to the car. The cultures of the telephone, radio, and television have also had a great effect on the evolution of the privatized house.

The automobile was not the only catalyst for the retreat to the backyard, nor did it merely facilitate suburban trends. As with other technologies, a direct causal relationship is difficult to discern. Popular attitudes and house plans demonstrate, however, that the automobile radically changed the way suburban Americans thought about the house and its relationship to the surrounding community. The garage's evolution from backyard shed to front entrance clearly reveals the impact of the car on domestic space. As the automobile became the dominant mode of transport in the United States between 1900 and 1950, the front porch vanished, the backyard came into its own, and the vernacular suburban house became a place where the family and the car could reside as equals.

## THE PERILS OF A PARKLESS TOWN

The early months of 1920 were traumatic ones for anybody who invested, worked, or shopped in downtown Los Angeles. After weeks of deliberation amid much controversy, the city council enacted a parking ban in the commercial core, which had been plagued by massive traffic congestion for some time. The new provision would ostensibly enable streetcars, and, hence, many people who came downtown, to move freely. Soon after the ordinance took effect on April 10, however, merchants witnessed a sharp decline in business. The earlier forecast of the *Los Angeles Times* had been correct in its depiction of the "perils of a parkless town." Denied ready access by automobile to the central shopping district, residents would not shop there at all, and soon major shopping districts would emerge in outlying areas to address the shifting market. Opposition to the ban swelled, and it was substantially modified less than thirty days after its inception. But the lessons of this episode left an indelible impression on Angelenos. To remain competitive, retail services must accommodate the motorist.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, having adequate places to park came to be seen as essential to the future health of the city. Such traffic problems were by no means unique to Los Angeles in the post-World War I era but they were more intensely felt, and efforts to rectify them often occurred earlier than in other places.

The factors contributing to the automobile's pivotal position in the city's development are not difficult to identify. Los Angeles was experiencing an enormous population boom from 319,000 people in 1910 to 576,000 in 1920 (an 80 percent increase) and then to 1,238,000 in 1930 (a 115 percent increase), which made it the fifth largest metropolis in the nation. This surge in growth, paralleling that of major eastern and midwestern cities during the nineteenth century, occurred concurrently with the introduction of the automobile as a major conveyance, used by the middle class as well as the rich and for everyday business as well as recreational outings. The region was especially conducive to this widespread reliance on the car. Roads were generally straight

The material presented in this essay was gathered in the course of research for a forthcoming book that examines aspects of the automobile's impact on retail development patterns in southern California from the 1920s to the early 1950s.

and flat, and the salubrious climate facilitated driving year round. Many people had recently moved to the region—by car—from small cities, towns, and rural areas where public transportation was more limited and driving taken more for granted than in densely populated centers. As a result, by 1924 Los Angeles enjoyed the highest percentage of automobile ownership in the world; automobile registrations in the county multiplied five and a half times between 1919 and 1929, from 141 to 777 thousand.<sup>2</sup> The nature of development also contributed to extensive automobile use. For decades the region had been heralded as a place of free-standing, single-family houses, and, as Los Angeles was transformed from a small city to a very large one, this ideal not only persisted, it was a major attraction to the middle and prosperous working classes alike. Abundant and hence comparatively cheap land further contributed to Los Angeles having the lowest population density and by far the highest percentage of single-family houses in the United States by 1930.<sup>3</sup> These conditions were well known to Angelenos, who were quite conscious of how and why theirs was a great city in the making.

Under the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the Los Angeles area became a seminal proving ground for architectural experiments to accommodate motorists' needs. No other metropolis in fact contributed in so many ways to the reconfiguration of commercial development that began to occur during the interwar decades as a result of widespread automobile usage. As early as 1921, an alternative to the downtown tourist hotel, called the Motor Inn, was erected in Boyle Heights, providing a model for the more famous Milestone Mo-Tel in San Luis Obispo, begun three years later, and countless subsequent examples. The region also rightfully can claim the world's first drive-in bank, constructed in 1937.<sup>4</sup> Other types of facilities, including drive-in restaurants and drive-in laundries, did not originate in the area but did appear early, were developed in as ambitious a way as could be found in the country, and soon became closely identified with southern California's rapidly expanding urban landscape.<sup>5</sup>

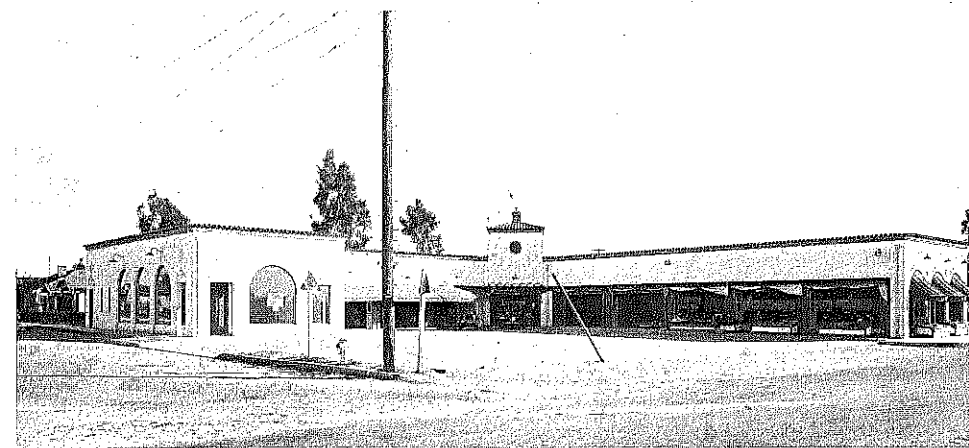
As significant as such experimental work might be, it was not central to the evolving structure of new commercial districts. Motels remained in peripheral locations; other drive-in facilities were relatively few in number or were anomalies prior to World War II. Throughout the metropolitan area, the overwhelming majority of retail development followed a traditional pattern of buildings occupying all or most of the front portion of their lots along well-traveled streetcar and automobile routes. By virtue of its extent, dispersed

over a vast, primarily residential area, this development eased the plight of the motorist. Services were close to home, and the grid of wide boulevards facilitated traffic flow. Nevertheless, there was nothing new about the underlying physical order to which these linear precincts conformed.

Decentralized retail services offered a partial solution to the problems of the metropolis in the automobile age, but they also generated difficulties. Large outlying centers, such as those along Western Avenue, soon became congested themselves, albeit far less so than downtown. The volume of traffic, combined with its rapid pace, rendered many sites, once considered prime retail locations for a streetcar-oriented populace, of lesser value. These circumstances, coupled with extensive overbuilding of commercial facilities during the speculative real estate frenzy of the 1920s, intensified competition among merchants and, no doubt, the willingness of some to try alternative courses.

Among the most significant undertakings to devise a fundamentally new configuration of both external and internal space tailored to address the routine of the motorist was a long-forgotten type known as the drive-in market. These complexes in fact comprised the first common retail building type, not catering to the automobile itself, to make such a design departure. Unlike most analogous experiments of the period, the drive-in market became a ubiquitous feature in the metropolis. The earliest known example was erected at Glendale in 1924. After several subsequent years of sporadic trial ventures, the type rapidly gained popular acceptance. By the opening months of 1928 dozens of examples were being constructed; four years later over two hundred of them existed in the region.<sup>6</sup>

The change in configuration that the drive-in market represented seemed radical at that time; most of the valuable frontage area was given over to parking and the building itself straddled the rear of the lot on one or, more generally, two sides. Instead of lining the standard shoebox form of grocery and other stores, goods in the drive-in market were oriented to the incoming patron in an open, light, and airy setting. Another key difference lay in merchandising. The relatively large lot required to incorporate a forecourt induced builders of drive-in markets to employ a nascent practice of combining related facilities whereby the presence of each would reinforce the appeal of the others. Thus, these markets had at least several departments—for groceries, fruits and vegetables, meats, a delicatessen, and a bakery. Often other basic services, such as a florist, drug store, or cafe, were included



**FIGURE 10.1**

*Hour Market, 1928, Cable and Wyant, architects, 6700-6706 West Boulevard, Inglewood, California  
(no longer standing).*

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The Car and the City



**FIGURE 10.2**

*Billie Bird Market, 1929; 2311-2321 West Main Street, Alhambra, California (altered).*

145

The Perils of a Parkless Town

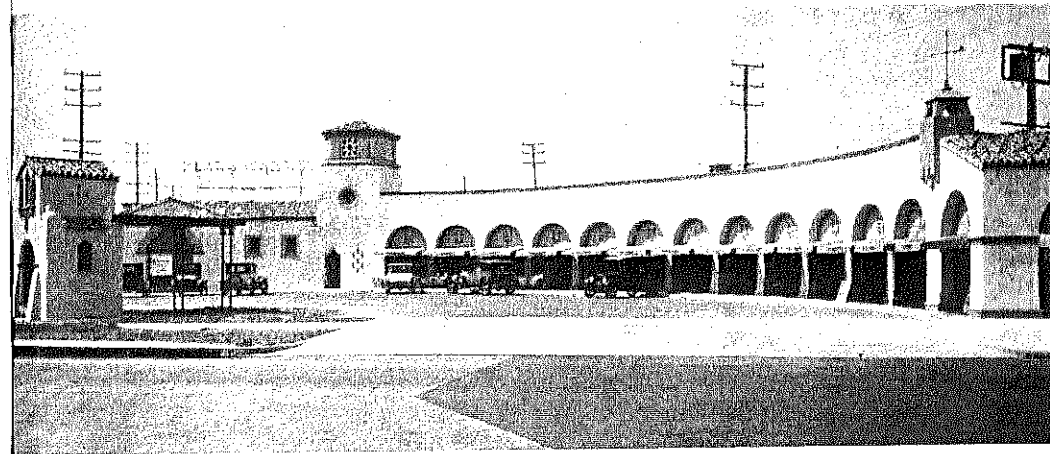
in one or more end units. Each department was leased to an individual merchant, but the entire food-selling area was designed, and in effect operated, as a unit.

Convenience was key to the concept's success. The forecourt allowed motorists to park right next to the store rather than searching for curbside space. The range of items sold attracted more customers and fostered increased purchases per customer. Greater sales permitted longer hours of operation, which generated additional revenue and enabled a pricing structure that gave these independent operations a competitive edge over chain stores. Once the type had demonstrated its profit-making capacity, the demand for leases seemed insatiable; units were occupied almost as fast as speculators could construct them during the peak years of 1928–30. The diffusion process occurred through neither large corporations or special-purpose syndicates, but rather from the work of scores of individuals who adhered to a more-or-less standard pattern, each seeking to profit from what had become a lucrative form of real estate development.

The merchandizing strategy found at drive-in markets had already been applied with considerable success to auto service centers, called super service stations, the first of which appears to have been built in Los Angeles in 1914. Many such facilities erected after World War I utilized a configuration and the idea of one-stop shopping—in this case, for all basic automotive needs—that developers of drive-in markets adopted a few years later.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the markets' major contribution lay not in originating the concept, but in adapting it to non-automotive retail functions and demonstrating that, even when the car itself was not the primary object of attention, breaking from a traditional mode was advantageous.

Once that demonstration was made, the design of drive-in markets became relatively standardized. Variations in size, range of goods, configuration and siting for the most part encompassed a limited spectrum.<sup>8</sup> The most conspicuous differences tended to be in outward appearance. Some examples were simple and cheap, others quite elaborate. On occasion, exotic imagery was employed, as with the Clock Market in Beverly Hills or the Mandarin Market in Hollywood (both 1929), to secure a memorable impression and, it was hoped, a larger clientele.<sup>9</sup>

With or without exotica, drive-in market design revealed an underlying aim of creating work that was more distinct than the pervasive, plain, boxlike buildings characteristic to most retail facilities in outlying areas—work that would be more compatible with surrounding residential neighborhoods.

**FIGURE 10.3**

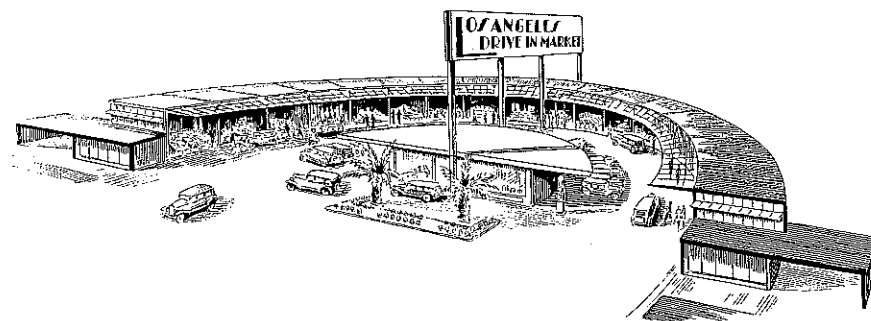
*Plaza Market, 1928, Morgan, Walls and Clements, architects, 4651–4663 West Pico Boulevard, Los Angeles (no longer standing).*

While this concern became widespread for commercial architecture generally during the 1920s, designers of drive-in markets were especially conscious of the need to create schemes conducive to attracting the attention of customers in moving vehicles. The designs most admired at that time, such as the Plaza Market on Pico Boulevard by Morgan, Walls and Clements (1928), possessed a simple, clear arrangement of forms and elements so as to register a memorable impression of the complex at a fleeting glance. However intricate the details might be, it was believed that they should remain subordinate to an overall effect tailored to the motorist more than the pedestrian.

In pursuing these aims, the architects of most drive-in markets employed traditional imagery, yet the field attracted several leading modernists as well. Lloyd Wright's work, such as the Yucca-Vine Market in Hollywood (1930), was among the most striking and became a prototype for the bold, exuberant, abstract vocabulary of roadside architecture in the region after World War II.<sup>10</sup>

Equally influential in this regard were some of Richard Neutra's schemes for drive-in markets, such as a hypothetical study (circa 1928) in which, at a very early date, the building is a minimalist interplay of vertical supports, roof slab, and glass walls. A solution that seemed almost as radical at that time was realized by George Adams with the Mesa-Vernon Market in Leimert Park the same year, a design that was among the most widely publicized and highly regarded examples of the type, and which exhibited qualities that would remain current in retail design at least through the 1940s.<sup>11</sup>

Drive-in markets attracted national attention among real estate developers, retailers, planners, and architects. The type's influence was considerable in scope. Frank Lloyd Wright adapted the idea for market centers in his Broadacre City plan of the early 1930s.<sup>12</sup> Of far more immediate consequence, however, was the work of a Washington, D.C., real estate firm, Shannon and Luchs, which erected the Park and Shop in 1930 after some two years of market and planning studies. This complex was larger than most drive-in markets, but the main difference was that it combined the drive-in concept with that of the neighborhood shopping center: the market was only one of ten stores encompassing a full range of everyday retail services.<sup>13</sup> Previously, the few such centers that had been developed in the United States had a traditional street-front configuration. The Park and Shop proved that the forecourt afforded a distinct advantage and the open front, so important to drive-in markets, was not an essential feature. The scheme served as a



**FIGURE 10.4**

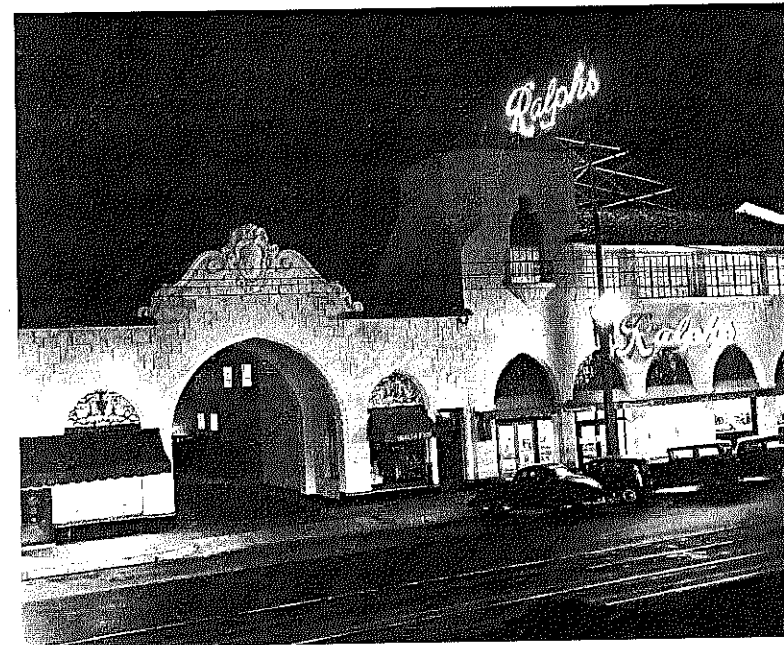
*Los Angeles Drive-In Market, probably a hypothetical scheme, Richard Neutra, architect, circa 1928.*

model for dozens of other planned shopping centers erected during the 1930s and hundreds more built after World War II.

Even by 1941 drive-in neighborhood centers could be found from Buffalo to Atlanta, Houston to Tacoma, but *not* in southern California. The circumstances contributing to the absence of such work in the place that had given rise to its market progenitors are too numerous and complex to address fully here, but a few key factors deserve attention. During the 1930s Angelenos felt they had better alternatives. One was the supermarket, which itself was a child of the region, pioneered by the Ralphs Grocery Company in the late 1920s, and which had completely usurped the drive-in market as the preferred retail outlet for food by the mid-1930s.<sup>14</sup> The two types had some attributes in common, but the supermarket was not only much larger, its rectangular configuration proved more effective in inducing shoppers to circulate throughout the premises. Both factors were essential to high-volume sales, which, in turn, became important to business survival during the worst years of the Depression. By the time the economic picture began to improve, the supermarket's advantages were regarded as transcendent. Examples continued to be built in great numbers, collectively becoming one of the most distinctive features of the urban landscape in southern California and an increasingly prominent one in other parts of the country toward the decade's end.<sup>15</sup>

Much like the earlier drive-in market, the supermarket was often sited somewhat apart from concentrated retail nodes so that adequate land could be secured at a reasonable price for both the building and the adjacent car lot. Creating additional retail facilities as part of the scheme almost never was undertaken because the supermarket was viewed as a destination point unto itself; customer draw remained sufficient without a supporting cast. To attract such patronage, however, it was believed that the building must abut the sidewalk so that it could stand as a prominent local landmark to motorist and pedestrian alike. Offstreet parking was situated to one side rather than in front. Side entrances leading directly from the lot became ever more standard by the late 1930s, yet the supermarket's architectural treatment in most cases continued to emphasize the street facade alone. In visual terms, the parking area was thus residue space rather than an integral component of the design, as it had been with the drive-in market.

The street orientation of supermarkets reflected a common outlook in the region. Through the 1920s, boosters nurtured the ideal of the great metropolitan core as much as they did neighborhoods of detached houses. Repeat-



**FIGURE 10.5**

*Ralphs Supermarket, 1929, Russell Collins, architect, 171–181 North Lake Street, Pasadena, California (no longer standing).*

edly, visions of the future depicted not one but a multitude of skyscraper centers scattered about the Los Angeles basin. While little such development was realized until recent decades, the local passion for a metropolitan image, coupled with one for scenographic drama while motoring, had a profound effect upon the nature of commercial development. Downtown Hollywood embodied this sentiment to a certain degree, but the key examples were found along Wilshire Boulevard in the blocks around Western Avenue and in the precinct known as the Miracle Mile. Here at once was the skyscraper city and the dispersed linear city.<sup>16</sup> Off-street parking was provided on some of the Wilshire properties, but only at the rear where it would not ruin the big-city allusion or the excitement of the urban landscape as it was seen from behind the wheel.

Wilshire Boulevard set the standard for countless smaller retail precincts in the region during the 1930s and 1940s. Planned shopping centers developed during this period maintained a sense of street-front drama by adhering to the pattern of showing facades and offering rear parking. Such complexes were often conceived and operated more as an agglomeration of stores than as a fully integrated facility. On the whole, merchants showed a persistent reluctance to abandon their traditional sidewalk orientation. Food retailers whose supermarkets formed the anchor units of these centers were especially adamant on the matter.<sup>17</sup>

Only in the 1950s, with the planning of much larger and more centrally organized shopping complexes, did the local street-front pattern begin to erode. The first significant departure came with the Lakewood Center (1950-53) near Long Beach, which was also among the earliest regional shopping malls in the nation.<sup>18</sup> Given its immense size (occupying a 165-acre tract and containing over sixty units) and internally focused configuration (with a pedestrian way as the organizational spine), the parking lot, planned to accommodate over twelve thousand cars, could no longer be relegated to either the sides or the rear; it had to be circumferential if all stores were to enjoy ready access. Such circumstances made the mall the generator of its own physical order, responding little if at all to that of the environs. By this time, too, the street no longer held so much appeal as a showcase for architectural display. The boulevard, defined by tangent buildings as much as by its own spatial openness, became, as it were, the commercial strip, a much more loosely organized panoply in which open space tended to dominate and free-standing signs often assumed a more important role than buildings as the means by which the motorist's attention was secured.

The development of architecture to accommodate the motorist is not always the neat, linear sequence it is often depicted as being, whereby space devoted to the car steadily is given increased primacy. Rather, the process can be complex and filled with diverse, sometimes divergent, strains. Regional factors also may be crucial to understanding the sequence. Los Angeles gave birth to the drive-in market, then spurred its rapid demise after about five years. New developments, stemming in part from the drive-in market, were ignored locally in favor of others, equally new, but also revealing a persistence of tradition. Not until the advent of the mall, which permitted no reference to long-standing, street-oriented patterns, were local conventions discarded.<sup>19</sup>

The drive-in markets that helped to start it all have long been forgotten. Yet recent work in the region demonstrates that the process also can be somewhat cyclical. As the demand for regional malls has become saturated and driving to them on the freeway becomes ever less appealing, as escalating land values have tended to render the supermarket an ever less profitable enterprise, as the city's boulevards approach ever more a gridlock, and as finding a place to park—anywhere—becomes ever more a problem, Angelenos have created the microcenter.<sup>20</sup> It is not quite the drive-in market again, and it is not at all fashionable to like them the way people enjoyed drive-in markets, but they are a new success story for the convenience they afford to a populace ever conscious of the perils of a parkless town.