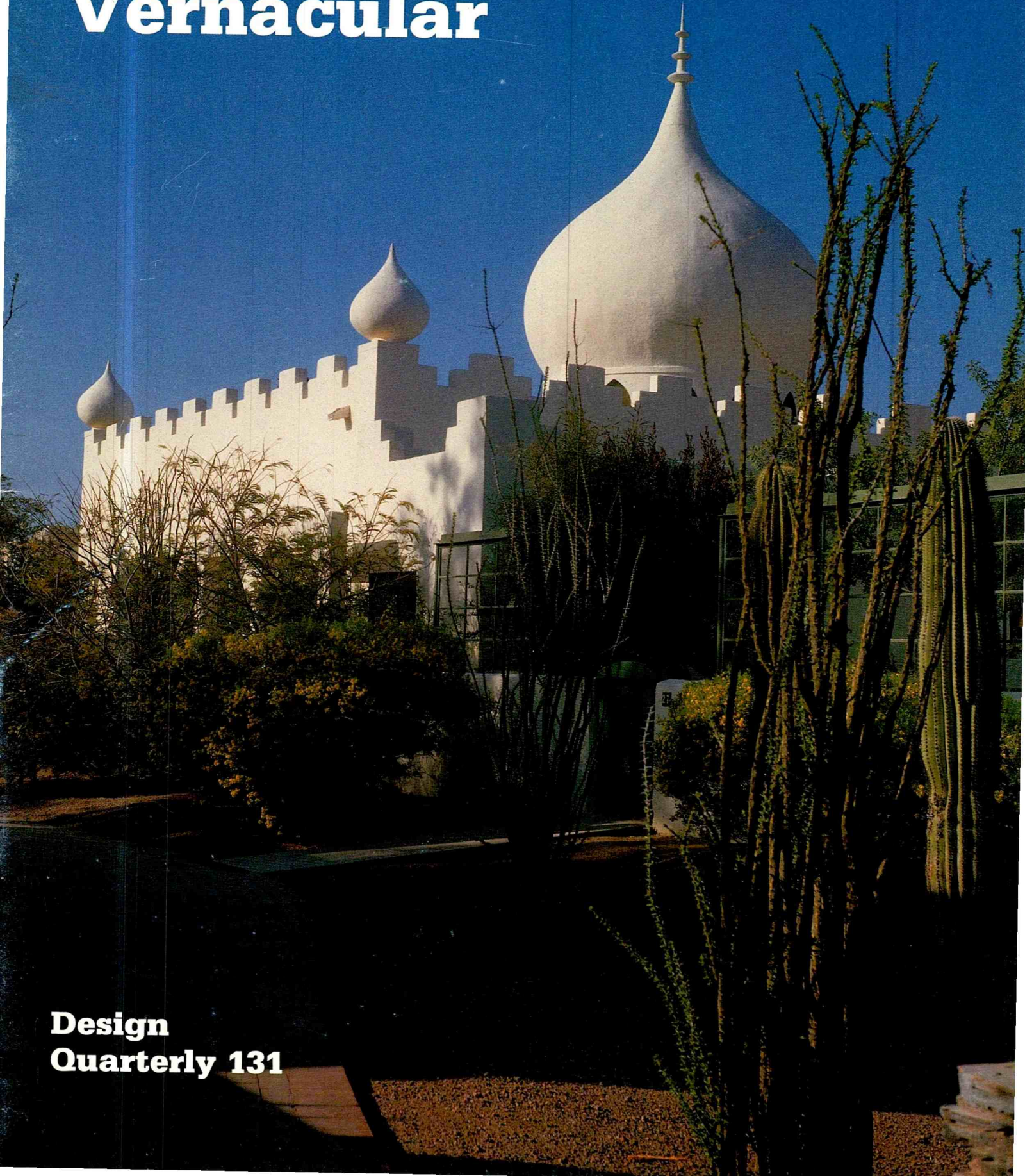


Unvernacular Vernacular



**Design
Quarterly 131**

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front cover:
Casa Blanca 1936
5101 North 66 Street
Scottsdale, Arizona
Robert Evans, architect
Minarets added in 1946
by George Borg
Christian Roberts and Jones,
architects for post-1978
alterations and additions

The writhing ocotillo branches outlined against the fleshy turnip dome fixes the date and time of this photograph—present-day Fantasyland, anywhere USA. It's a land of any time or place if a developer thinks it is salable. The Casa Blanca demonstrates that architectural escapism is not a recent phenomenon, and illustrates how in this case escapism has evolved through successive remodelings.

back cover:
Raven Tower 1977
310 North Street
Houston, Texas
R.W. Walker, owner-builder

The owner of the Raven Tower put utilitarianism on a pedestal by placing a pre-fab box on a tower. This is an extreme example of contemporary American pragmatism, since most domestic architecture makes at least some gesture toward style.

Unvernacular Vernacular

**Contemporary American
Consumerist Architecture**

**Design
Quarterly 131**

**Essay and photographs
by John Chase**

Continental Bank 1982
5094 Hayden
Scottsdale, Arizona
Jack Kaufman & Associates, architects



A 1920s building would perhaps have had a more refined molding detail at the cornice line, but otherwise would have

looked remarkably like this bank building. The spiral "colonnets," the arched portico, and the narrow windows indicate

that this building is not a case of popular consumerist architecture aping high-art Postmodernism. The

Mediterranean references are used here not as devices, but because they are enjoyed in and of themselves.

French Market Homestead 1981
3900 Veterans Boulevard
Metairie, Louisiana
H.B.E. Architects



Even the most stolid World War I era beaux arts bank building never managed to be quite this boxy. The lack of cornice,

the huge span of the third story balcony, and the isolation of the doorway in an expanse of plate glass are each appalling

faux pas. Unfortunately, until recently, literal references to existing architectural vocabularies, in this

case Neoclassicism, have largely been the province of consumerist architecture.

Editor's Notes

In defense of the vernacular (or, as we learn, the unvernacular) of the marketplace, John Chase staunchly maintains: "It's not the selection of a style that determines architectural quality, rather, it is how well the style is handled." This truism of postmodernist theory is, of course, an architectural variation on the gentlemanly apologia: "It's not whether you win . . ."

To understand Chase's thesis it is essential to remember that the category of architecture he dubs "consumerist" has long been with us. To accept his thesis, one must believe in the inevitability of the shopper mentality.

As Chase demonstrates, the "people's" version of Postmodernism has existed for generations, and clones of all styles are found throughout the U.S., although as he points out, there is more room for them in the Sunbelt than in the older cities of the Northeast. The current so-called "high-art" version, which is so eloquently promoted and defended by the likes of Charles Jencks, Robert A.M. Stern, and most significantly for Chase, Charles Moore (his mentor at UCLA's School of Architecture), is finally of much less interest than the plebeian one. For where the high-art examples are almost always self-conscious and overwrought, the consumerist efforts—less studied, less historically accurate, more blatantly theatrical—are consequently less pretentious and easier to accept on their own marketplace terms.

The consumerist vernacular responds not to particular local conditions, as do genuine vernacular

forms, but to national dreams and aspirations created by the mythmakers of the popular arts. In the 1950s there was the charmingly naive film *Mr. Blanding's Dreamhouse*; in the 1980s, the "restoration comedy," *The Money Pit*. Both films examine idealizations of living spaces as envisioned in the mass media. But more astonishing because of its embrace by the intellectual community, we have Tracy Kidder's recent sophisticated paean to historicism, *House*. In his book, Kidder traces the process of building Mr. Yuppie's dreamhouse with the assistance of what remains of the counterculture in the building trades. For myself, I prefer Chase's thorough look at what the consumerist mentality implies for the future of architecture in America, even though I have nagging reservations about his defense of its expressive validity.

John Chase is one of a group of younger critics whose thoughts on architecture need to be heard. His *Exterior Decoration: Hollywood's Inside-out Houses*, 1982, published by Hennessey & Ingalls, was edited by David Gebhard. He often writes architectural criticism for such publications as *L.A. Architect* and *Progressive Architecture*. On a recent photography excursion, Chase made the pictures seen here, which depict in a straightforward manner superb examples of the unvernacular vernacular. They are a witty and fascinating collection.

MSF

Unvernacular Vernacular

Contemporary American Consumerist Architecture

John Chase

Every culture has accepted ways of doing things—customs that its members take for granted. This concept of the vernacular becomes ambiguous, however, when it is applied to contemporary America. Although there are accepted ways of doing things today, such practices are often the result of technological innovation, marketed by means of advertising, whereas, in earlier times these customs were the result of slowly evolving patterns of social interaction.¹

Just as soap opera has supplanted folklore and storytelling, commercialized architecture has taken the place of the traditional vernacular in the building of present-day America. A large part of this building is, nonetheless, a new kind of vernacular, as the historian J.B. Jackson and the architect Charles Moore, among others, have observed.² Commercial vernacular is part of our economic and social evolution and it is tied to changes in public taste and living patterns. What makes its study confusing is that this vernacular seems to be so unvernacular.

Traditional folk structures are viewed with nostalgia and affection because they are associated with ways of living that have been outmoded by technological change. Pennsylvania Dutch barns and nineteenth-century California adobe ranch houses have

obvious appeal. But car washes from the 1960s and coffee shops from the 1950s are considerably less charming to most observers, because they still function as part of everyday life and are not yet obsolescent.

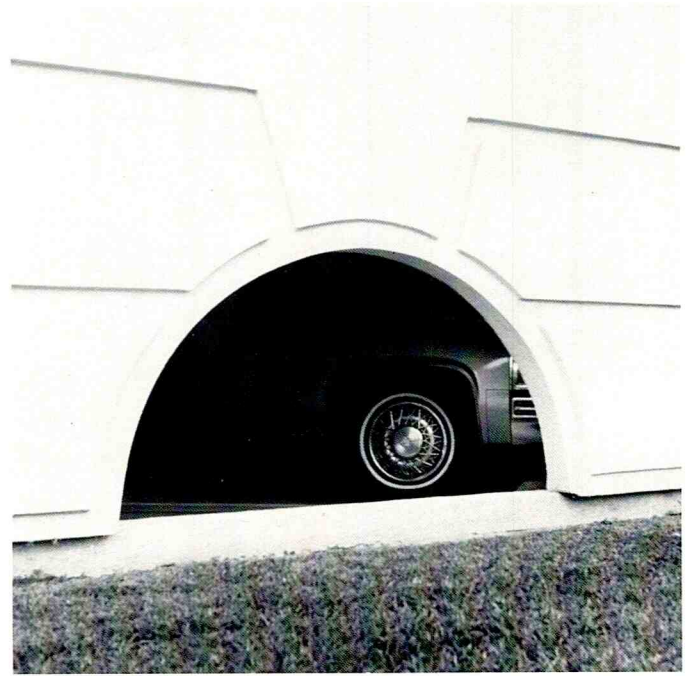
Commercial vernacular's most perplexing quality is that it goes to great lengths to appear to be what it is not. In the early 1960s, apartment houses in southern California were sometimes given steep-pitched front entrances adorned with tiki idols. Apartment houses in Texas often have Frenchified clipped box hedge parterres and mansard roofs. Just as in the worlds of literature and theater, no one is disturbed by the obvious duplicity of these forms. On the contrary, make-believe—an altered identity—is part of what these buildings are selling.

In contrast, historical vernacular architecture provided a direct accommodation to a particular set of demands. A building in a northern climate might have a very steep roof to shed snow. A building in a southern climate might have an internal courtyard, or large verandas for shade and ventilation. These buildings have been admired for the way they fit their locale, climate and purpose. They pretend to be nothing more nor less than what they are. The commercial vernacular, on the

**Marble Arch townhouse-apartment complex
Westheimer at Merilee
Houston, Texas**



**The Park Regency Terrace Townhouses 1983
2333 Bering
Houston, Texas
Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown, architects
McCleary Associates, associate architects**



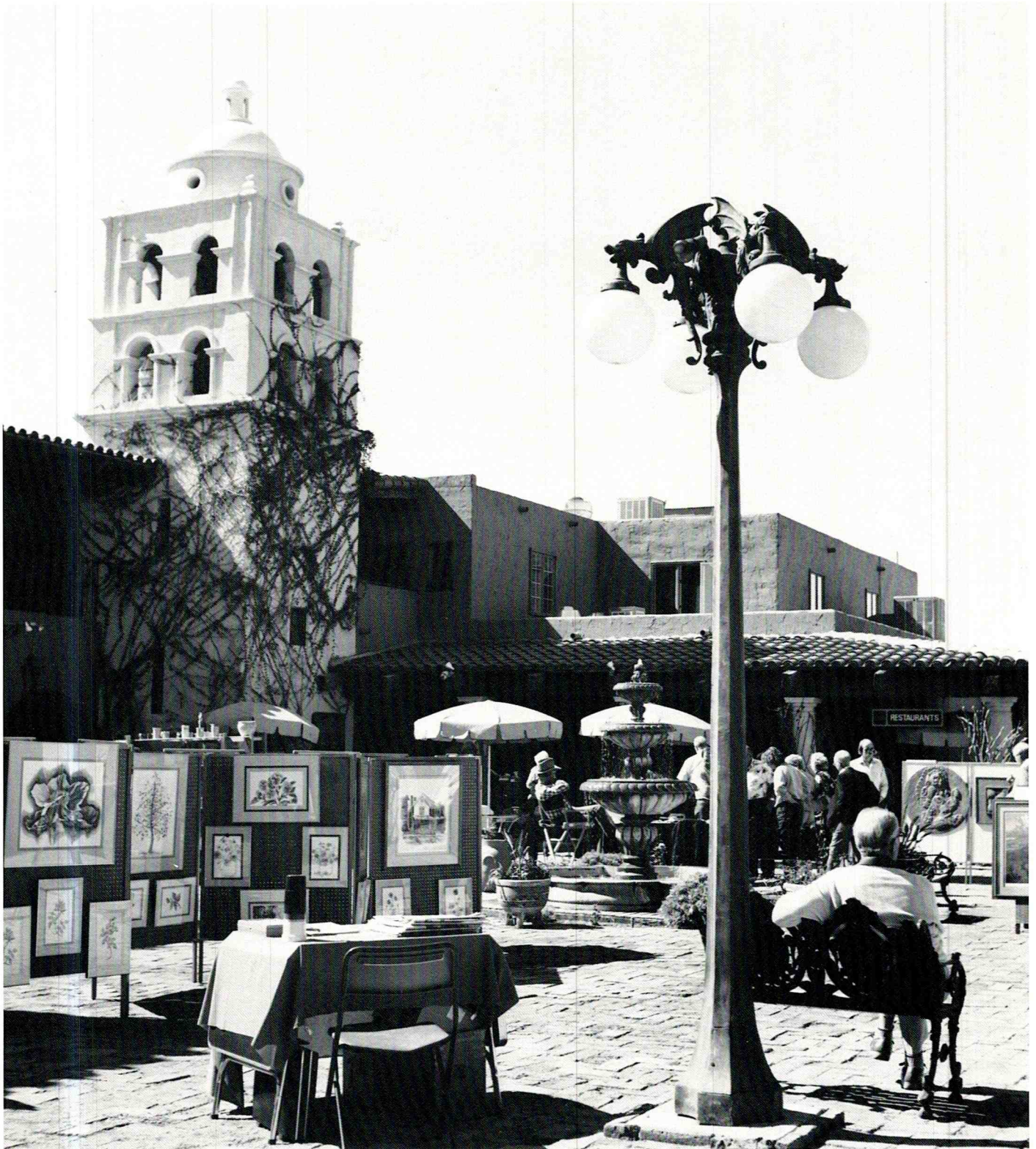
Even if its plywood is popping open at the seams, there is no mistaking the architectural intent of this portico. It's supposed to be a major event, making anyone who passes under it feel important. Buildings such as this demonstrate that aesthetic merit and the ability to communicate a message clearly are two distinct issues.

Irony reverts to kitsch as the best known and generally most successful alchemist of low-art sources into high-art architecture fails to make the transition here. However, it is difficult to judge any building harshly that frames a Cadillac hubcap so well.

Pinnacle Peak Village Plaza 1975
8711 East Pinnacle Peak Drive
Scottsdale, Arizona
Dick Davis & Associates, architect, for Jerry Nelson

The purpose of the ersatz mission in the background is neither religious nor social: it is commercial. It houses a restaurant. The Mission Plaza gives locals a place to go that promises to be more

stimulating than listening to the drone of the TV set or the air conditioner. It is a symbol of the shared public life, even if it is borrowed from another culture and time.



other hand, pretends to be almost anything other than what it actually is. Spanish tile, tudor half-timbering and colonial American fanlights are guises worn like Halloween costumes by consumerist buildings.

Traditional vernacular architecture is almost always thought of as consisting of a single style from a particular region, such as the sod house of the prairie states. The commercial style is as eclectic as the society it reflects, favoring every style from expressionistic Modernism to atavistic neo-primitivism.

In *Design Quarterly* 128, J.B. Jackson writes about commercial vernacular architecture as a continuation of man's age-old struggle to house himself and his needs with as much comfort and decency as possible.³ In Jackson's view the highway has taken the place of more traditional generators of shared hopes and beliefs, such as the church. In its omnipresence, the culture of the highway structures the lives of most Americans. It is the necessary precondition for everything from the suburban shopping mall to the drive-up taco stand and the single-family detached house.

But just as the auto gives, so does it take away. America's auto-mobility has broken the new cityscape into a mosaic of disconnected fragments. It accommodates functions by parceling them out into single-use centers, such as the college campus, the shopping mall and the bedroom suburb. Buildings and building uses that formerly faced each other across a crowded street are now barely visible from each other's front doors across acres of asphalt. The new city is like a Tinkertoy with the connecting pieces missing.

The progressive adaptation to the auto in the United States, and its creation of single purpose enclaves, is illustrated by the evolution of the shopping mall. The commercial strips of the teens and twenties gave rise in the 1930s to corner markets and convenience centers with small parking lots facing the street. These were followed by shopping centers, anchored by department

stores or supermarkets in the 1940s and 1950s. In the 1960s and 1970s the shopping center was supplanted to a large degree by the enclosed, multi-level suburban shopping mall. Today, the shopping mall has returned to the heart of the American city, occupying much the same role as European shopping arcades, such as Milan's Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, often replacing conventional downtown retail districts.

The shopping mall is popular because it offers the widest array of consumer goods in the most concentrated form. Consumers may shop, bank, eat and watch movies all in the same complex. However, such complexes are isolated from the rest of the city, and turn inward on themselves. Consequently, we do not pass by the facades of mall stores in passing through the city, as we do the storefronts in a conventional retail district. The latest generation of consumerist architecture has been shaped by a reaction against the street. As J.B. Jackson writes, "This development is typically a self-contained complex with its own surrounding buffer zone, its own orientation, its own pattern of movement."⁴ Ceded to the motorist by the pedestrian, the street is no longer a pleasant place to stroll, window-shop, or see old acquaintances.

This concept of the encapsulated pedestrian wilderness is inevitably a fertile spawning ground for the creation of consumerist architecture. It allows the shopper to be effectively isolated from the world at large, seduced to linger and programmed to consume.

The culture of the highway is a direct response to economic imperatives, but its imagery is determined in a self-conscious way. This is particularly true for the category of commercial vernacular architecture I term consumerist, an architecture concerned with selling the products or the services that it houses.⁵ Fast-food architecture, for example, is carefully calibrated to appeal to potential customers, and the choice of the correct

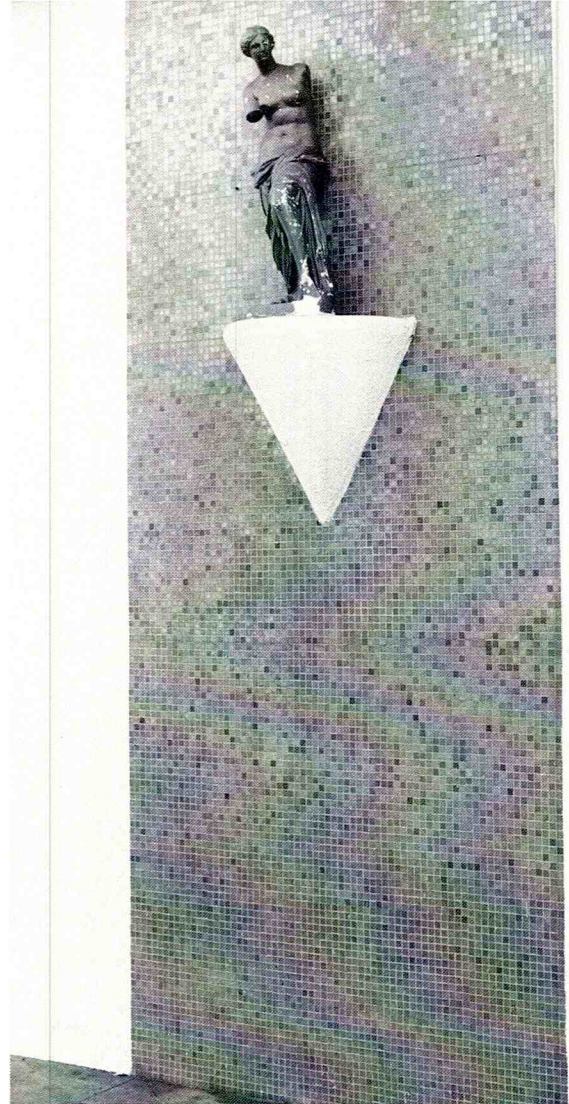
**Santa Monica Boulevard and Gower Street
Hollywood, California**



The old-fashioned consumerist landscape still looks like this in much of America. The network of signs renders any architectural communication superfluous. This signage is part of a long American tradition of plastering cities with signs, banners and billboards, dating back well into the

nineteenth century. In more affluent communities, where theme-oriented consumer enclaves flourish, such signage is frequently banned because it is considered crass to be so direct about commerce.

**Jack La Lanne's European Health Spa
5364 Wilshire Boulevard
Los Angeles, California**



Some long established cultural symbols have become fairly battered in recent times, while new ones are largely consumerist in nature. The message of this mass-produced Venus di Milo outside Jack La Lanne's health emporium is that part of a body beautiful is better than none.

Haddon Street Rowhouses 1983
2001 Haddon at McDuffie
Houston, Texas
Arquitectonica, architects



The choice of primary colors and forms for Arquitectonica's neo-rationalist townhouses is no less or more arbitrary than the choice of a period revival style.

Arquitectonica's bold forms and colors can compete with mansard roofs and colonial columns on the open market.

42nd Place office building 1984
4203 Indian School Road
Phoenix, Arizona
Porter, Pang and Baldinger, architects
for Double M Development Ltd.

42nd Place demonstrates that modern decoration can appear just as foolish as period revival ornament. Bright colors, shiny surfaces and the architectural fads of the

moment have been applied to the building in order to bring the prospective renter to a screeching halt on multi-laned Indian School Road.

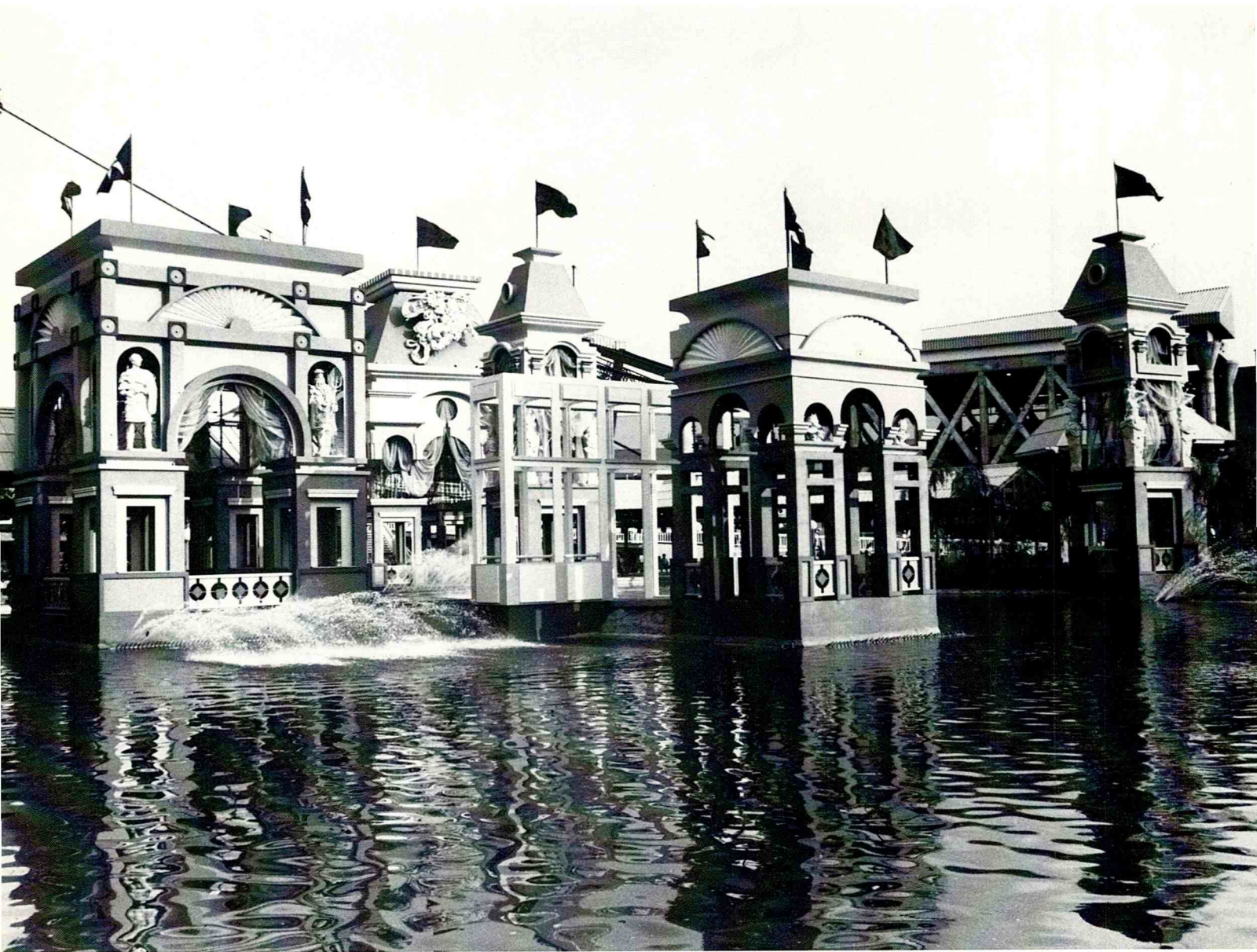


City Center Motel 1958
600 West Van Buren
Phoenix, Arizona
Bauer and Associates, architects

Buildings like the City Center Motel were designed to be comprehended at twenty-five miles per hour. Now the City Center is very much a period piece of consumerist architecture,

both because of its expressionistic Modernism, and its frontal relationship to the automobile. A newer consumerist building would be less focused on the street.

Pavilions in the lagoon of the Louisiana World Exposition 1984
Charles Moore and Arthur Anderson, architects



Malcolm Heard, Jr., courtesy Rice Design Alliance

Charles Moore is the foremost American "high-art" architect to attempt to communicate with the public on its terms, as well as his own. Here he captures the essence of nineteenth-century exposition

architecture. Because he is not afraid of literal references, of spelling out a story so it can be clearly read, these pavilions can hold their own against the potent imagery of consumerist buildings.

**Westside Pavilion 1985
10800 West Pico Boulevard
Rancho Park
Los Angeles, California
The Jerde Partnership, architects
Sussman/Prejza, signage and color palette for
Westfield Holdings Ltd. of Australia**

imagery can make or break its profitability. In other cases consumerist architecture is its own product. This is true for the single-family house, the largest consumer purchase that most people make.

Almost any building type can be classed as consumerist architecture, although government, religious, industrial and warehouse buildings rarely qualify. The designation is earned by buildings that incorporate messages and themes through their architecture. What distinguishes contemporary consumer architecture from earlier forms is that it is consciously conceived of as imagery, as a form of environmental psychology based on marketing. Theme environments such as Disneyland are planned to play upon the emotions of their users.⁶ The unity of conception found in earlier vernacular architecture between a building's program and its imagery breaks down in today's consumerist architecture. The choice of imagery is not automatic, instead it is carefully considered.

The great virtue of consumerist architecture is that in contrast to much "high-art" architecture it is concerned with issues of psychology and communication. High-art architecture and consumerist architecture are at cross-purposes by nature. Architects are trained to go to elaborate, some might say, absurd lengths to avoid fantasy and pretension, qualities which are the lifeblood of consumerist architecture. Consumerist architecture must communicate with the public clearly and directly or fail in its purpose. High-art architecture, as it has often been practiced in late Modernism and often even in Postmodernism, may not attempt to communicate with its audience at all. Architects such as Peter Eisenman may base a house design on a series of rotating cubes in the manner of minimal artists, or an iconoclast such as Frank Gehry inverts normal expectations about building finishes by exposing construction. Such invention is often an aesthetic accomplishment, but it also frequently



Malls started in the suburbs, and now they have moved into downtowns, often replacing them entirely. In some towns the mall really *is* the downtown, such as in Torrance, California. Its Del Amo Mall is so big that several stores have a branch at

either end. The Westside Pavilion in the Rancho Park section of Los Angeles is the first major shopping mall in southern California to use postmodern exterior detailing and a revivalist interior as a drawing card for shoppers.

La Borgata 1981
6166 North Scottsdale Road
Scottsdale, Arizona
Jones and Mah, architects, for John Hamilton



What does a reproduction of an Italian hill town have to do with the indigenous culture of Scottsdale, Arizona? Nothing. That, of course,

makes it the perfect theme for a shopping center. It isolates the affluent customers of this deluxe shopping center from the outside world,

leaving them free to spend, spend, spend, while fantasizing that they are in Europe, rather than Arizona.

Mixon House 1984
3211 Pittsburg
Houston, Texas
Taft Architects



The auto-age garage undermines the Age of Enlightenment upper stories in this Houston house by Taft Architects. The phenomenon of period survival in popular

culture, and postmodern revival of period references in high-art architecture are supposed to be two different things. The high-art stuff isn't necessarily more

successful than its populist cousin, as is evident in Taft's somewhat awkward Mixon House.

Speculative office building 1984
13323 Washington Boulevard
Los Angeles, California
Thomas Layman, architect; Bill Stein, owner and interior architect



This Los Angeles "spec" office building has the typical flaws of pop-consumer architecture. The inconsistencies between the nineteenth-

century domestic origins of its imagery and the twentieth-century office function it actually performs are neither wittily acknowledged nor

gracefully resolved. But, just as in so many other buildings of this genre, the intent to create a cozy workplace comes through.

sidesteps the nature of architecture as an applied, socially-based art form.

For some two decades now, while theorists such as Colin Rowe, Alison and Peter Smithson and Robert Venturi have been attempting to make modern architecture relevant to everyday life, consumerist architecture has been matter-of-factly relevant all along.⁷ The debate on consumerist architecture, as a part of the larger debate on the merits of popular culture has been divided between those who reject it as fraudulent, and those who view it as a legitimate form of cultural expression. Exclusionists, such as historian Kenneth Frampton, dismiss the subject of mass culture out of hand, as unworthy of consideration. Defenders of popular culture, such as the critic Charles Jencks, often promote the subject primarily for its titillation value.

Both positions are flawed, because they are not based on an acceptance and analysis of the essential character of contemporary culture. The predominance of mass production and consumption means that cultural values are now commercialized. They do not trickle down from an aristocratic or educated elite and they do not trickle up from a tradition-bound peasant class. America's values are molded in the marketplace through a complex interaction of personal choice and behavioral manipulation.⁸

Consumerist architecture is often attacked because it frequently employs historical references or outright revivalism. Historicist forms and ornament were long forbidden to serious practitioners of architecture in the years following World War II, during the triumph of Modernism. Literal references to the past pioneered by Charles Moore and Robert Venturi did not begin to reappear in serious architecture until the 1970s. Actual pediments, cornices and other period revival decoration were still suspect, however, and had to be laundered through the use of irony, in order to make them respectable. Readily identifiable ornament from the past

communicated too well for modernist-trained architects, since it lacked the required degree of abstraction.⁹

Consumerist architecture has always been comfortable with the use of ornament and historical references, and it needed no sanction from the world of high-art architecture to employ them. Indeed, as the postmodernist threshold of tolerance rises for non-ironical references, and as consumerist-revivalist architecture grows in sophistication and correctness to its sources, it is sometimes difficult to know how to keep the categories separate. The most sophisticated consumerist buildings, such as Jones and Mah's La Borgata shopping center in Scottsdale, Arizona, and the least sophisticated high-art buildings, such as Taft's Mixon House, are roughly comparable.

It is easy for consumerist designers to use historical references, because popular architecture does not demand the unity of conception required of high-art architecture. The individual components of pop and vernacular buildings are often more important than the way they are put together. The inclusion of the requisite amount of neo-Victorian bric-a-brac on Thomas Layman's 1984 office building for Bill Stein in Los Angeles, is much more important than the compositional relationship of the bric-a-brac. Content is frequently more important than form in commercial vernacular architecture.

High-art architects have been handicapped in their use of ornament because they have been trained to value the creation of new forms and the expression of individual artistic sensibility above all else. Historically, architects have been more impressed by the setting of new precedents than by the following of old ones.

However, if the real purpose of architecture in a consumer society is to create moods and emotional settings, just as literature and theater have traditionally done, then there is no place for accusations of plagiarism or anachronism. If a certain

Speculative House 1924
3374 Chevy Chase, River Oaks Subdivision
Houston, Texas
John F. Staub, architect, for Country Club Estates



Selecting historical motifs for houses is nothing new. Prospective home buyers and builders have been picking over styles ever

since Andrew Jackson Downing and Calvert Vaux popularized the picturesque aesthetic of variety and stylistic

appropriateness. This 1924 speculative house was patterned after the Old Absinthe House in New Orleans.

**My next door neighbor, Juan,
as the Incredible Hulk, Halloween 1982
McCollum Street, Silver Lake
Los Angeles, California**



Juan's Halloween fantasy is based on canned commercial television and comic-book imagery. But in living out this fiction he makes it his own. Because popular

culture is based on common denominators that are immediately accessible to the public, this commonality gives it a mythic power.

form has the required associations to do a particular psychological job then it is the correct form.

Revivalism also has the advantage of being clearly legible to the public; everyone knows how a Victorian house or a southern ante-bellum mansion is supposed to look. By following the formulas of a particular style carefully, designers have the benefit of the discipline and coherence given by working with rules.

Many modernists are quick to write off revivalist architecture as a second-rate copy of the past. Leaving aside that the point that our age is far from the first to revive the forms of previous eras, there are valid causes for the failure of revivalist buildings. They fail, most often, because of insufficient budgets, and because of architects and clients whose liking for and commitment to the historic language they are using is half-hearted, and not because of any inherent aesthetic weakness in the idea of revivalism. The rules for designing a Spanish Colonial bank branch, like the Hayden branch of Scottsdale's Continental Bank, are no more limiting in themselves than the rules for designing a modern branch bank. It is not the selection of a style that determines architectural quality, rather it is how well the style is handled.

The most successful revivalist buildings are those in which the architect is well-versed in and comfortable with his chosen historic language. Too much compromise with contemporary architecture can blur the communicative power of revivalist buildings. This is why the best revivalist buildings are usually found in historic districts with sophisticated design restrictions.

At the same time, consumerist architecture is often less inhibited about embracing visions of the future than its high-art brethren. The stucco-box apartment houses of 1950s southern California display a startling array of abstract patterns on their billboardlike facades.¹⁰ They differ from high-art architecture because they are more literally

modernistic, incorporating actual symbols of modernity such as starbursts and checkered, multi-colored Malibu spotlights.

Consumerism is the single most important social and economic organizing force in the United States today. It is a combination of mass production and consumption that utilizes advertising and product design to stimulate the public's demand for goods and services. In order to succeed it must enhance daily life, over which it holds sway. For example, with the successive introduction of canned and then frozen foods, consumers found themselves buying nationally advertised products where once they would simply have bought fresh local produce.

The role of consumerism in shaping personality is growing in the United States as traditional customs are supplanted. The citizen of today's consumer society is often relatively free of the cultural programming that would have been his birthright in non-industrialized societies. Information on how to cook, relate to peers, adopt attitudes and values is shaped by instruction manuals, how-to guides, consumer and service articles in magazines and television programs. Attitudes are selected by comparison shopping and touted by experts popularized by the media, rather than handed down from parent to child.

By and large, the only new institutional environments that are actually used by large numbers of people and play a central part in their lives are shopping malls and theme environments. Southern California news stations carried a report in 1985 that the favorite cure for periodic depression of suburban Orange County residents was a shopping trip.

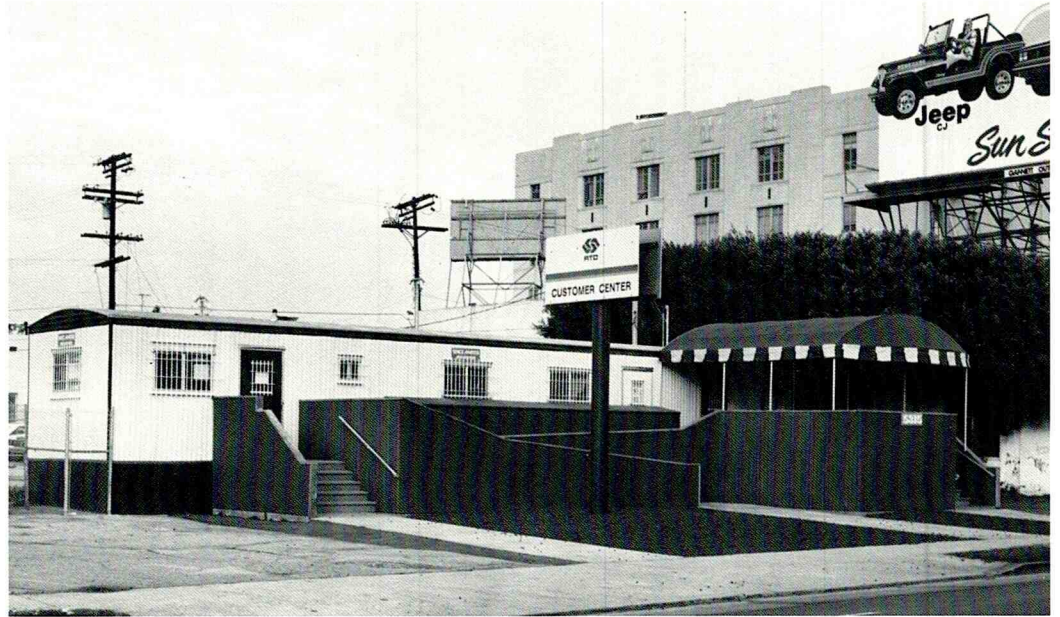
But just as consumers are shopping for products and services so they are also shopping for atmosphere and experience. This is one of the reasons for the importance of novelty in consumerist architecture. Presenting a grocery store in a false-front Western stage set, such as the former Aunt Tilly's in West Hollywood's Pacific Design Center building, or a group of

**RTD Customer Center
5315 Wilshire Boulevard
Los Angeles, California**

Symbolizing the collective importance of civic life through architectural means seems to be a thing of the

past, judging by the building that houses an arm of the chief transit agency of the country's second largest city. If the

RTD were a consumer oriented building and not a public agency, its building would not be housed in a trailer.



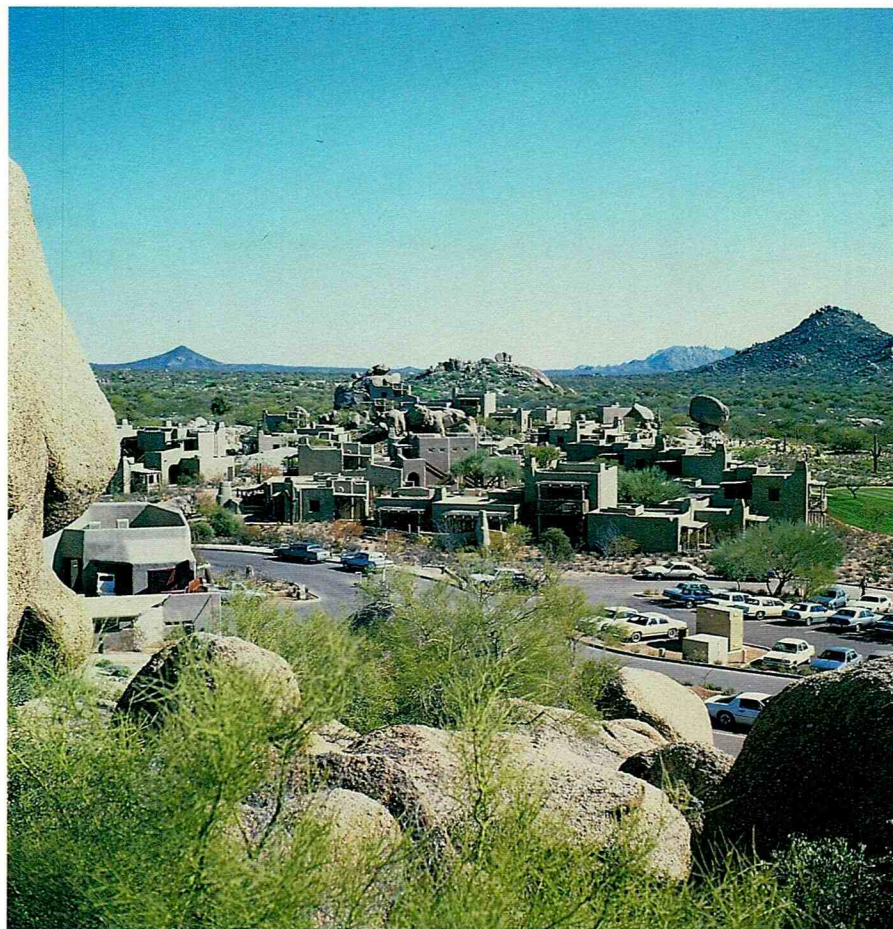
**Apartment house 1957
2488 Beachwood Lane
Hollywood, California
Jack Chernoff, architect
for Marcus Shipman**

The use of modernistic forms lent an air of excitement to the 1950s stucco-box apartment houses of southern California. Styled as angularly as an

Eisenhower-era tailfin, its overturning roofline is borrowed from Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin West. Jack Chernoff, the apartment's architect, was one of the most

prolific of the stucco-box designers, nicknamed "Packing Jack" for his ability to cram the most units into his projects.

The Boulders 1984
34631 North Tom Darlington Drive
Carefree, Arizona
Bob Burns, architect, for Rock Resorts, Inc.



**A luxurious resort in
primitive guise for devotees
of the Flintstones.**

Plaza del Sol shopping center 1982
2915 Red Hill Avenue
Palm Springs, California
Robert Altevers, architect, for John Wessman



Modern styling has been employed for southern California supermarkets since the streamlined moderne of the 1930s. In

the 1950s and 1960s most new markets were great blank boxes with glistening plate-glass street facades sym-

bolizing the up-to-the-minute thrill of gathering all those groceries under one big roof. In the 1970s and 1980s market owners

became convinced that it was easier to entice shoppers with more nostalgic storefronts.

condominiums as a Pueblo-Moroccan village, such as the Casa Blanca complex in Phoenix, gives it a competitive edge over buildings that do not offer this extra level of metaphor.

In this sense consumerist architecture operates like any other form of marketing and advertising. The labeling of a building is often as or more important than the actual character of its design. Taco Bell restaurants, located in areas outside of the southwestern states, are designed to appear Hispanic, but not too Hispanic. In actuality they are really rather straightforward buildings with a few superficial Hispanic touches.¹¹

Advertising and marketing enable consumers to experience goods and services twice, instead of once. The experience of anticipation is intensified and becomes as important as the actual experience of acquisition. Once the product has been purchased, or the theme restaurant visited, the anticipation reinforces and validates ownership or patronization. This is possible because if a message is delivered long and loud enough by advertising and marketing, it will have a certain credibility, regardless of reality.

Much care is devoted in tract, attached-house developments, for instance, to disguise the real nature of the product. Everything from the realtor's hyperbole in the promotional brochure, to the breaking up of the facades of multi-unit buildings to appear to be a series of semi-detached buildings is part of the effort to win over potential buyers. Triplexes in the Woodbridge Estates subdivision of Irvine, California are disguised to look like huge single-family mansions.¹² The promotional literature for the development of MountainGate, in the Santa Monica Mountains of Los Angeles, compared its overall setting to Florence, Italy, and its half-heartedly revivalist housing units to the distinguished period revival architecture of 1920s California.¹³

As a result, the affluent sections of suburban Sunbelt cities like those of

Phoenix, Houston and San Jose have become like giant miniature golf courses. Each building or enclave of buildings has a competing theme, and is isolated from the others by asphalt and landscaping.

Nowhere is the absence of historic context as a precedent for new growth and the freedom to build almost anything more noticeable than in Houston. The only zoning this wide-open city has ever had has been by private deed covenant. Its first development restriction, a minimal setback ordinance, was not passed until 1982. In cities like Phoenix and Houston, there is almost no public life, in the classical sense, as defined by Hannah Arendt.¹⁴ Even Houston's downtown has no street life because of a system of underground tunnels linking its office towers, that segregates its office-worker population.¹⁵ Some neighborhoods, such as the Post Oak/Galleria area do approach conventional notions of urban density. But a hierarchical notion of place is foreign to the city, and high-rise towers may erupt in neighborhoods of two-story houses, or in areas just beginning to be developed.

Architect and visionary Rem Koolhaas writes about Manhattan as *Delirious New York*, in his 1978 book.¹⁶ To Koolhaas it is the landscape of possibility, where human aspiration can find expression at fever pitch. But the unlimited objects in the new consumerist landscape make Manhattan pale by comparison. In Manhattan it is the piling up of propinquities, of the shared lives of millions of people, that makes the city vital. In Houston it is the simultaneous importance, the equivalence and the every-developer-for-himself quality of the open terrain that gives the city vitality.¹⁷

Houston is not simply a grid, but a flashing gridded scoreboard where the squares can be altered overnight. It is a peculiarly American landscape because of the interchangeability of the pieces, spatially and chronologically. This reflects the character of contemporary life in the United States where goods and services have been made easier to obtain and

available at more locations and more times than ever before. The suburban house with a full freezer of TV dinners, a well-stocked video tape library and two cars in the garage has almost unlimited resources. These resources free its inhabitants from dependency on traditional social networks for obtaining both entertainment and the necessities of life.

This is what a consumerist society delivers in return for manipulation by advertising; a high quality of life measured in material terms, and a sense of freedom and choice. The choice may be limited by behavioral conditioning, but then what culture ever does escape the age-old battle between individual free will and societal imposition of values?

Consequently, there is no longer any functional need for traditional urban centers in areas such as Houston. The needs these centers of public life fill must be found in other forms, as Charles Moore noted in his essay "You Have to Pay for the Public Life."¹⁸ Consumerist public life is divorced from traditional time-honored social, religious and cultural frameworks, such as those found in the Middle Eastern bazaar, or the Main Street and town square of a Booth Tarkington short story.

In this respect consumerist development is both a reaction to and a manifestation of the same forces that have shaped the rest of American urbanism. Land planning in the United States tends to solve one problem at a time without taking into consideration the side effects of a solution. The superhighway that guts a town center, or a low-income housing development that institutionalizes a ghetto are typical examples of this approach to problem solving.

American land use is far less controlled by the planning and zoning efforts of local government, than is European. In America, almost everything is for sale at the right price, whether it is a vineyard or a church building.¹⁹ The highest profit determines what goes where. This is the explanation for the entertaining variety of new

American townscapes. It is the result of the collective whim of real estate developers and corporations, the result of expediency as much as planning.

The need for consumerist architecture has been fostered by the growing dominance of the machine in daily life. Large-scale systems of production and distribution become more important than the social mechanism of shared civic life and human interaction. Buying a newspaper from a familiar salesperson at a corner stand creates the possibility for social exchange. Buying the same newspaper from a vending machine does not.

Expediency also characterizes American architecture. Much of it is simply a means to an end. For example, the architecture of discount department stores such as Zody's or K-mart is not a significant factor in their success compared to store planning—the location and presentation of merchandise. The discount shopper cares primarily about getting his microwave oven at the lowest possible mark-up above the wholesale price. The shopper doesn't care whether Zody's is part of a set of local institutions such as a civic plaza.

The discount philosophy also reflects the increased informality of modern life. The public at large dresses with less respect to ceremony and a greater interest in convenience than in the past. Thus the usher vanished from the movie house at the same time that hats disappeared from the heads of the movie goers, and the gilt cupids were stripped from its walls. In the past a movie theater was expected to be a spectacle in its own right. By the 1970s it had become nothing more than a warehouse for movies.

Similarly, the office building has become the cheapest possible envelope for the amount of space it surrounds. Most of its budget is devoted to the provision of the required services. The space it contains invariably has no character because of rigid development restraints, and because it must present the fewest possible obstacles to interior alterations.²⁰

Callender's Restaurant 1985
5773 Wilshire Boulevard
Los Angeles, California
Jim Adams, architect, for the Marie Callender pie stores



Marie Callender hurls pie in the face of the 1948 Prudential Building by Wurdeman & Becket. The owners of Callender's knew that no one would

pass through the button-down portals of an international style office building to wolf down baked goods, so they frosted the facade of the

Prudential Building with plaster and used brick. The restaurant is the flagship of the Marie Callender chain.

Million Dollar Theater Building 1918
307 South Broadway
Los Angeles, California
Albert C. Martin & William L. Woolett, architects

The attitude that most buildings exist to serve a function, and not as objects of any great interest in themselves was aided by advances in building technology and legitimized by orthodox Modernism drained of its earlier ideological base. The prefabricated panel replaces the masonry block, and the single sheet of glass replaces multiple panes. Now walls of glass can be epoxied to the surface of buildings without the need for even so much as a mullion. Late Modernism has celebrated the machine's capacity for producing blankness by creating buildings that are not articulated either by ornament, or by the materials from which they are made.

This is why elaborate consumerist buildings exist. They are a release from the overwhelming rationality and uncommunicativeness of the rest of the environment. The America of blank concrete tilt-slab warehouses and identical franchise buildings feeds the public's desire for a substitute reality.

The consumerist building type is part of a long history of American theme buildings that place a heavy emphasis on historical or fantastic imagery. Best known are the programmatic buildings that symbolize their function, such as Los Angeles's 1946 Tail o' the Pup hot dog stand.²¹ They have another important precedent in exposition architecture, such as the beaux arts vision of Chicago's 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. The popularization of a picturesque aesthetic theory during the nineteenth century legitimized a wide variety of nostalgic, sentimentalized emotions and set a precedent for the escape from daily life into the realm of adventure and romance. Current consumer environments are often as overtly dramatic as picturesque follies.²² Both the eighteenth-century mock grotto and the twentieth-century mock pueblo apartment house give the users of these buildings vicarious chances to participate in fantasies.

The growth of tourism and the acceptance of the concept of leisure time



Older skyscrapers like the Million Dollar Theater prove that tall buildings do not have to be impersonal. Buildings such as the Million Dollar, made up of large and

small elements, and relieved by ornament, are more compelling than the more abundant simple slab office structures that dominate the Los Angeles skyline.

have also contributed to the rise of consumerist architecture. The precursor of the modern consumer was the tourist, who saw the environment as a series of cultures and places that he enjoyed as a literary or artistic experience, but did not inhabit. Many of the contradictions of consumerist architecture can be explained by using tourism as a metaphor. Tourism combines two contradictory but linked impulses. It is an attempt to experience the unfamiliar and the unknown. But this encounter with the exotic can be unsettling. Alien surroundings often produce the desire for familiar comforts as any traveler knows. Foreign places may call for an antidote to their foreignness, or a watered-down version of a strange land that is easier to assimilate than the real thing.

This is one of the explanations for the coupling of bland uniformity and set pieces of prefab fantasy that characterize the current tourist landscape. The attraction of familiar things has helped to spread a network of virtually identical services across the United States, from Holiday Inns to Burger Kings. The real reason you can't go home again is because you can't ever leave it. Its amenities are now provided by commercial chains, from the motel room to the fast-food stand. Home is now franchised in all fifty states.²³

The advantages of standardization to the corporations that own the franchises and the chain businesses are obvious. They are the usual economies of lower labor cost per unit allowed by mass production, marketing and the design of an optimum product outlet. The 7-Eleven chain of convenience stores, for instance, consistently updates its merchandise layouts for maximum profitability. The Motel 6 chain has rooms with set layouts that are virtually identical in each of its more than 375 locations.

The most recent generation of sophisticated franchise buildings is, as historian John Jakle has described it, "total design" that coordinates building design, idea, building decor, product design,

service routine and signage.²⁴ It is this backdrop of pragmatism that makes consumerist buildings' fantasy components often stand out so starkly from the rest of the building. That is the startling thing about the period fronts and plain backs of rowhouses in Houston or the modernistic fronts and equally plain backs of Los Angeles's stucco apartment houses.

The idea that the same building plan and composition could accept a number of stylistic guises was a commonly expressed notion in the nineteenth century. Still current in consumerist architecture is the notion of specific styles for specific building types in the form of rustic wood for steakhouses and pristine formica interiors for airline reservation offices.

Consumerist architecture differs from most earlier architecture, because its imagery does not always make a consistent or coherent whole, even if it is part of a slick management/marketing/decor total design package. Its functional underpinnings are often clearly displayed right along with the theme trim. The underlying attitude is one of expediency, in which the inclusion of any architectural detail, any references to history or human experience are extras that may be dispensed with whenever necessary. Thus it can be seen that consumerist buildings may take advantage of either architectural or non-architectural means to get their message across.

Imaginative and committed consumerist architecture can be refreshing in its spirited refusal to accept the tyranny of the world as it is. The genre is also an escape route from real problems and conflicts and a breeding ground for kitsch. The crudest consumerist architecture is capable of draining any enduring cultural meaning from its sources, because that meaning is reduced to mere entertainment. Theme restaurants often display books (or simply book jackets) on shelves as decorator's props to create a homey atmosphere. The books are never opened, and function only as symbols.²⁵

**Western Plaza Motel circa 1984
1066 North Wilton Place
Hollywood, California**

The “no-tell motel,” with its almost windowless street facade. You want pretty? Stay some place else then, because architecture is extra and it drives up the rates. This is

the kind of utilitarian building that forms a large proportion of the built environment, for which consumerist architecture serves as psychic release.

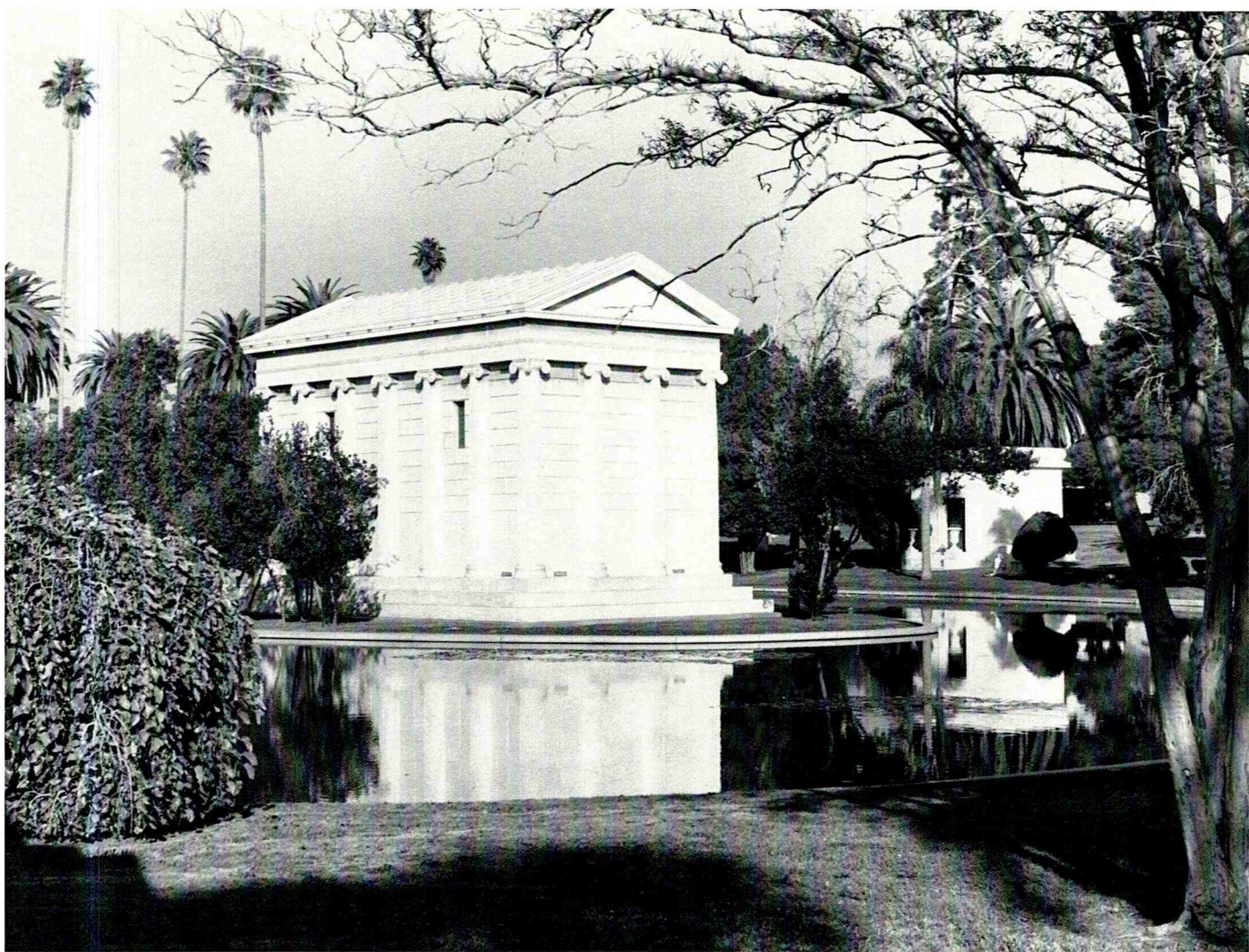


The meanings that consumerist buildings embody would once have represented widely shared values that reflected the overall character and organization of society. Now they do so only insofar as they represent a society in which cultural values are exploited as commodities.

This is the irreducible element of ambiguity in consumerist architecture. It genuinely reflects popular attitudes, and allows for the expression of a wide range of attitudes and emotions in highly specific and easily read form, to an extent that no

other sector of building production can match. Despite the simplification and limitation of the cultural meaning in consumerist architecture it still communicates with the public more effectively than any other genre of architecture. To ignore it is to ignore the information it can communicate about the society we live in. To disregard it as inconsequential is to underrate humor, fantasy and metaphor in design. Creating a cultural link between buildings and their users is part of architecture's essential purpose as a social art form.





opposite: Transco Tower 1983
2800 Post Oak Boulevard at the Galleria
Houston, Texas
Johnson/Burgee Architects
Morris Aubrey, associate architect,
for the Gerald Hines Interests

Philip Johnson's Transco building has one-tenth of the deco-gothic moxie of the 1920s and 1930s skyscrapers it is modeled after. That still puts it way ahead of everything else in its immediate vicinity. Transco is consumerist architecture on a giant

scale. It is the epitome of a traditional downtown skyscraper, an alluring beacon of urbanity. However, its siting—freestanding at the front and right, up against the Galleria at the back—is pure 1980s Sunbelt.

William Andrews Clark Mausoleum circa 1930
Hollywood Memorial Cemetery
6000 Santa Monica Boulevard
Hollywood, California
Robert Farquhar, architect

Even the dead don't get their cultural due from architecture any longer. Funerary monuments, religious and civic institutions, once held the prominent urban place that consumerist buildings now occupy. If William Andrews Clark,

the gentleman buried in this tomb, were unlucky enough to die in the 1980s he'd have to make do with a space in a blank-walled condo-mausoleum or underneath a new flat-to-the-ground grave marker.

Notes

1. Clement Greenberg clearly states the dilemma of high art in a mass society in two essays: "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" and "The Plight of Culture," in his book *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961).
2. J.B. Jackson defines the vernacular as the most direct and effective response to accommodate man's needs in his essay "The Vernacular City," from *Center*, vol. 1, 1985. Charles Moore elucidates the difference between past and present styles of vernacular in "Human Energy," a chapter in *Architecture for People*, edited by Byron Mikellides (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980).
3. J.B. Jackson, *Design Quarterly* 128, *Urban Circumstances*, 1985.
4. Jackson, "The Vernacular City," p. 43.
5. This discussion of consumerist architecture is a continuation of my earlier article on categories of building production ("The Garret, the Boardroom and the Amusement Park") that appeared in the *LAICA Journal*, no. 36, vol. 4, p. 21. See also the related articles in this journal: Elizabeth McMillian, "5 Basic Classifications of Building Production;" David Gebhard, "L.A. Preserving the Common-place."
6. Charlie Haas investigates the behaviorist psychology underpinnings of Disneyland in "Disneyland Is Good for You," *New West*, 4 December 1978.
7. Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966); and, with Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1972).
8. For a discussion of period survivalism see John Chase, *Exterior Decoration* (Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, 1982). No one has been more diligent in restoring twentieth-century period revival design to its rightful place than David Gebhard. His most recent revisionist sortie is "Traditionalism and Design: Old Models for the New" in *High Styles: Twentieth-Century American Design* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1985).
9. Charles Jencks makes a spirited defense of revivalism in *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977). "Tudor Styling at Top of Popularity List," *Los Angeles Times*, front page, real estate section, 1 June 1980 testifies to the continuing interest in period revival architecture.
10. See John Beach and John Chase, "The Stucco Box" in *Home, Sweet Home*, eds. Charles Moore and Kathryn Smith (New York: Rizzoli, 1983).
11. Philip Langdon, "Burgers! Shakes!" *The Atlantic*, December 1985, p. 74. See also Alan Hess's article "Golden Architecture," *LAICA Journal*, no. 36, vol. 4, p. 28, and his book *Googie: Fifties Coffee Shop Architecture* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1986).
12. Chip Lord, "Home Sweet Homes," *New West*, 20 November 1978, p. 109.
13. John Chase, "The Making of MountainGate," *L.A. Architect*, part I in November 1978, part II in January 1979.
14. Kenneth Frampton, guest editor, *Architectural Design*, vol. 52, no. 7/8, 1982. In this issue of *AD* entitled *Modern Architecture and the Critical Present* Frampton elaborates on Hannah Arendt's concept of the public life. He makes a case for high-art architecture as "critical regionalism," as a way of making contemporary architecture culturally relevant. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).
15. Phillip Lopate hunts for Arendt's public realm in Houston, and not too surprisingly, finds it missing in his article "Pursuing the Unicorn: Public Space in Houston," beginning on p. 18 of *Cite: The Architecture and Design Review of Houston*, winter 1984.
16. Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).
17. For a discussion of Houston rowhouses see Peter Papademetriou's "Magnificent Fountains, Beautiful Courtyards; Garden Apartments in Houston," *Via*, no. 4, 1980, p. 127.
18. Charles Moore and Gerald Allen, "You Have to Pay for the Public Life," in *Dimensions* (New York: Architectural Record Books, 1976), p. 105.
19. In 1964 Peter Blake noted that profit is the main design determinant of the American landscape, and pointed out the prevalence of single-use enclaves in American land use, in *God's Own Junkyard* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964).
20. See p. 9 of Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture, A Critical History* (New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1980), for Frampton's analysis of economic and functional determinism in current building production.
21. Rip Georges and Jim Heimann, *California Crazy: Roadside Vernacular Architecture*, with an introduction by David Gebhard (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1980).
22. See Anthony Vidler's "History of the Folly" in *Follies, Architecture for the Late-Twentieth-Century Landscape* (New York: Rizzoli, 1983). As Gebhard points out in *California Crazy*, eighteenth-century folly buildings are the spiritual antecedents of twentieth-century programmatic buildings.
23. Richard P. Horwitz's *The Strip: An American Place* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985) focuses on case-study examples of individual commercial strip businesses and has a worthwhile bibliography.
24. John A. Jakle, *The Tourist: Travel in Twentieth Century North America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), p. 195.
25. See the Taste in America issue of *Progressive Architecture*, June 1978, for articles on McDonald's, Regine's Disco and Oral Roberts University; and Ada Louise Huxtable's "Architecture for a Fast-Food Culture," in *The New York Times Magazine*, 12 February 1978, p. 23.

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