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As a continuation of our discussion on the "Meaningful Assessment of the Built Environment" which was begun in the last issue of the *Forum*, this number focuses on the recent past, specifically on the architecture of the twentieth century American roadside. The opening essay is provided by Chester Liebs; assuming that these buildings and objects merit consideration, he advances a series of questions which deal with how this subject might be approached. Marc Treib extends the discussion, exploring the reasons for their preservation and offering tentative criteria by which they might be evaluated.

FORUM on
 The Assessment of American Roadside Architecture

During the past decade, we have seen the rapid expansion of what popularly constitutes significance in "American" architecture, in part due to the preservation movement. While once most of the public thought that what was important was "Colonial"—anything painted white with a gable roof built before 1850—today the popular conscience has been extended to consider Victorian houses, industrial buildings, the evocative structures of "Main Street, U.S.A.," and even the high style urban form of Art Deco. How, then, should we consider the commercial structures, signs and symbols generated by the American highway?

Many of the early prototypes for distinctively twentieth century building forms—the gas station, the fast food restaurant, the motel, the supermarket, etc.—are readily approaching extinction due to changing highway patterns, functional obsolescence, corporate image updating, and most importantly, spiraling energy costs. We are currently on the verge of an environmental transformation due to energy shortages which may exceed in magnitude that which took place in the decades following World War II. It is the responsibility as well as the evolutionary role of architectural historians to place these roadside resources in context and to begin to develop methodologies for their documentation, evaluation and selective conservation. It is also necessary to apply serious scholarship to this area to cut through the miasma of "nostalgia" and "pop" with which a number of authors have clouded it.

Since we are just beginning to make sense of the architecture of the American roadside, I would like to raise a few questions and make some general observations in hope of provoking future discussion in this area.

What factors need to be examined in order to understand the morphology of the American roadside? The change in transportation from steam railroads and trolleys to automobile and airplane, and the new species of architecture induced by these changes. The evolution of concrete, metals, glass, plastics, and other industrially produced fluid building materials. The role of the Depression in fostering a social climate for the popular acceptance of what is "modern." The industrial designer as the packager of modernist theories into products that sell, the Chicago and New York World's Fairs as the marketplaces for modernism. The World War II period wherein an industrially

produced, consumer oriented, automobile motivated utopia is promised as a reward for the war effort. The post World War II era, where all the above becomes a reality in terms of the widespread decentralization of the built environment, based upon the availability of inexpensive fossil fuel.

At what point should architectural historians begin to study resources which are so close in time to the present? One answer to this question is the "Out of Production" theory. When a nineteenth century wooden molding needs to be replaced, it can be fabricated with a new piece of wood and a molding plane. Much of early twentieth century roadside architecture, however, is composed of mass produced architectural components. When, for example, a vintage 1939 carrara glass storefront needs a replacement panel, an entire industry would have to be retooled to supply the needed part, if one could not be obtained from salvage. With architectural products changing rapidly, structures only fifteen or twenty years old might be irreplaceable, making them candidates for architectural or historical significance because they are out of production rather than old.

Can we rely on existing archival material alone for studying these resources? No, for although it would appear that in this information laden century there would be an overabundance of potential documentation in this area, my own findings and those of a number of my colleagues reveal some serious gaps. For example, in microfilming periodicals many repositories have eliminated the advertisements—one of our major research tools for twentieth century roadside studies—in order to cut costs and save space. Post card collections, an important potential source of information are often surprisingly inadequate. I know of several collections with hundreds of views of "Main Street, U.S.A." and not one illustration of a motel, gas station or drive-in movie theatre. Other non-traditional but important archival materials for twentieth century studies—the snap shot, the home movie, the 35 mm. color transparency—are just beginning to make their way into enlightened repositories. Even if they do, their curatorial problems are enormous. There will be no substitute for recording these vanishing resources in order to make sense out of this phase of our architectural development.

Should out-of-production American roadside architecture be included in the statewide historic resources inventories? It should be and too often is not. These inventories are frequently viewed by those in government as merely a means of meeting federal requirements and for serving as a data basis for environmental impact reviews in comprehensive planning. In fact, these studies have far greater utility. They represent an indispensable basis for beginning to determine the evolution and significance of American architecture by providing a breadth of contextual information that was never before available to architectural historians. Any omission of an entire aspect of the built environment from these inventories will thus lessen their value. This data must be gathered now. Due to the energy shortages, a resurveying of the built environment twenty years from now may prove to be a financial impossibility.

There are many encouraging signs that the architecture of the American roadside is beginning to receive serious consideration.

A number of books have begun to appear on a variety of American roadside resources. Several state historic preservation offices have begun to nominate these sites and objects to the National Register of Historic Places. A Society for Commercial Archeology is now in its fourth year. The Historic Preservation Program in the Department of American and New England Studies at Boston University will be offering its two-week course in commercial archeology for the second year. Moreover, this issue of the SAH FORUM indicates that a serious dialogue in this area is developing among architectural historians. Hopefully all this activity will result in increased scholarship, documentation, classification and evaluation of the structures, signs and symbols of the vanishing American roadside, and the placement of these resources in context for the energy short decades preceding the turn of the twenty-first century.

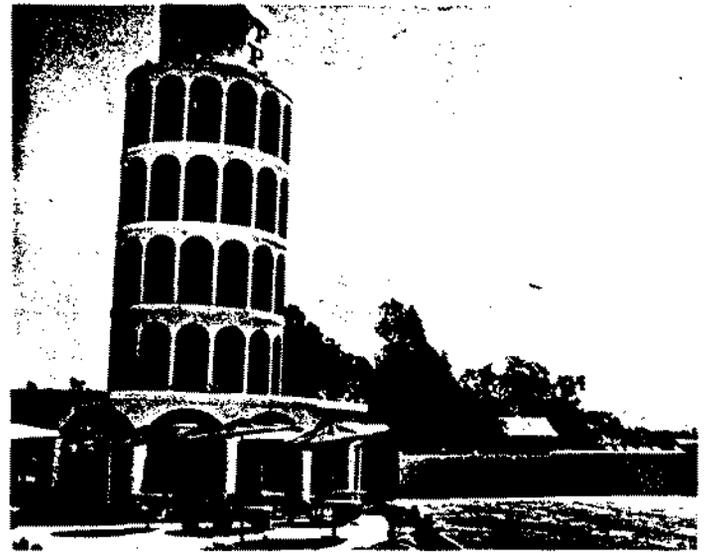
Chester Liebs
Burlington, Vermont

Preserve the Strip?! At first reading, it would seem that any suggestion to preserve America's recent commercial architecture is merely a pernicious part of the ever-growing tendency to preserve just about every aspect of the existing environment; a travesty of the intentions of "serious" preservationists. Yet there is a soundness, if not yet a method, behind the seeming madness. The commercial architectural vernacular is today a most significant, perhaps even dominant, part of both the architectural and experimental milieu of the U.S. of A. In the commercial vernacular we see the collective image of America as it sees, and wants to see, itself. The images used—the igloo, the Normandy house, the islander hut, the sleek streamlined bulge, the Mansard house, the wood butcher, the colonial, in whatever combination—are clearly stated, if not overstated, and absolutely overt. The message couldn't be more blatant in signs—which is exactly what these building styles are.

Significant architecture, some might say, should deal with greater restraint. Exuberance is of a lower order. Architecture should deal, they might continue, with the implicit rather than explicit embodiment of cultural ideals. But the American potpourri of ideas, images, forms, words, food, and products from places and times past, present, and future is a more direct statement of spirit (from everywhere to everybody) than the taut skins of the International Style or the heavy rustication of the Richardsonian Romanesque. And the tract house, the Levitt cape cod, the Neo-Spanish hacienda, the stucco palazzo, all re-scaled to American suburban living are the domestic equivalent of the projected imagery of the commercial urban or strip architectural vernacular. These are the dominants, if not the monuments, of American architecture of this century.

There are stories embodied in form, and there are stories scrawled in spaces. We must be concerned with the relation of form to location as well as concerned with the form itself. Like the curvilinear structure of the suburban tract, the layout of the Strip is a reflection of the society that produced it. Could a great strip, Las Vegas being an almost too obvious example, be preserved as an historic district? Could a section of the original Levittown be preserved as representative of the post-war residential thrust? Should each of the eras of the McDonald's shop be preserved as the most imageable single structure in the United States (just as Ronald McDonald is, to American children, the most imageable "person" after Santa Claus)?

From the Thirties on, we have been developing a national architecture which has been at the very least inflected toward the automobile in all but the oldest, most pedestrian environments. The American embrace of the automobile has given birth to an architecture which assumes personal mobility as its central concern. The domestic and commercial architectural vernacular expresses this concern, as does America's capitalistic economic base. The two rights—the right to drive, and the right to make



The Pisa Pizza Tower, San Diego, California
(Their motto: "Have a piece o' Pisa Pizza.")

—Courtesy of Marc Treib

money—have defined the channel of building in the last five decades. We now have the Strip and its architecture, the billboard, suburbia and its service supports, and the interstate structures as tangible evidence of our societal values. If preservation is based on significance, rather than the informed formal biases of a few self-selected groups of environmental evaluators, the Strip would certainly figure prominently in the architectural history of twentieth century America.

But what to save? The issue might be less cloudy than it first appears. First, let's save the historical monuments of "Economic Expressionism," and the "Perceptual Baroque," the one-of-a-kind, often fanciful creations disappearing at an ever-increasing rate. Examples of this category would be the Tail O' The Pup in Los Angeles, the noted hot dog stand in the shape of same; the duck of the roast duck drive-in rendered immortal by Robert Venturi; or the leaning tower of the Pisa Pizza in San Diego, California. Second, let's include the monuments of franchise development: an early McDonald's (if one still exists), the middle Mansard period—and perhaps it's not even too early for a thematic example. Certainly a classification system paralleling that of Minoan pottery could easily be created! Third, let us look at the quintessential districts such as the Las Vegas Strip or some other worthy rival. Is there a prototypical strip? There are, in all probability, additions to this list, and the question of the district certainly raises some controversial issues since the strength of the Strip is its changeability, its function as a mirror of buying trends and the realm of the architecture that supports it. How could this notion of change be frozen in time, particularly in the relatively neutral strip architecture where function can be accommodated with the changing of a sign?

Many questions remain to be both asked and answered; many problems remain to be faced and solved. But if preservation is to keep from being the retention of the few by the few, the commercial and domestic vernacular of this century will have to be considered as worthy of the movement's attentions.

I can only applaud Mr. Liebs' efforts as a first step.

I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia; what is Greek art, or Provençal minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give me insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds.

The American Scholar
Ralph Waldo Emerson

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