

DESIGNED TO SELL: THE EVOLUTION OF MERCHANDISING AND DISPLAY  
IN MID-TWENTIETH-CENTURY DEPARTMENT STORES

by

Alessandra DeMaio Wood

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History

Spring 2016

© 2016 Alessandra Wood  
All Rights Reserved

**DESIGNED TO SELL: THE EVOLUTION OF MERCHANDISING AND  
DISPLAY IN MID-TWENTIETH-CENTURY DEPARTMENT STORES**

by

Alessandra Wood

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_

Arwen P. Mohun, Ph.D.  
Chair of the Department of History

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_

George H. Watson, Ph.D.  
Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_

Ann L. Ardis, Ph.D.  
Senior Vice Provost for Graduate and Professional Education

I certify that I have read this dissertation and that in my opinion it meets the academic and professional standard required by the University as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Signed:

---

Katherine C. Grier, Ph.D.  
Professor in charge of dissertation

I certify that I have read this dissertation and that in my opinion it meets the academic and professional standard required by the University as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Signed:

---

Sandy Isenstadt, Ph.D.  
Member of dissertation committee

I certify that I have read this dissertation and that in my opinion it meets the academic and professional standard required by the University as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Signed:

---

Jonathan Russ, Ph.D.  
Member of dissertation committee

I certify that I have read this dissertation and that in my opinion it meets the academic and professional standard required by the University as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Signed:

---

David Brody, Ph.D.  
Member of dissertation committee

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

So many people have helped me succeed in writing this dissertation. First and foremost I would like to thank my advisor and committee chair Kasey Grier, who is the reason I came to UD. Kasey, thank you for your continued support and pushing me to be excellent. My committee: Sandy Isenstadt, who helped me develop my strength in interior design history; Jonathan Russ who pushed me to think about business and economics; and David Brody, who has been a mentor since my days at Parsons. You have each helped me immeasurably and I offer my deepest and sincerest thanks.

I have had the pleasure of working with a number of librarians and archivists who have gone above and beyond to help me. My early research started at The Hagley Museum with the help of Lynn Cantonese, Kevin Martin, Lucas Clawson, Max Moeller, and Steve, who pulled box after box for me. To my colleagues and friends at the Winterthur Museum & Library, especially Brock Jobe and Amy Earls who both offered me invaluable experience in my early days as a graduate student. Librarians at The Winterthur Museum and Library were always keen on offering advice especially Emily Guthrie and of course, Jeanne Solensky, and even though I didn't use any of her archives offered amazing support. Thank you to the staff at the Baker Library at Harvard Business School, Chicago History Museum Library, Milwaukee County Historical Society, The Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum Library, Archives of American Art, The New York Historical Society, and Manuscripts & Archives at Yale University Library. Special thanks to Brian Collins at the Dallas Public Library and Stephen Ross at NorthPark Center.

The DeGolyer Library at Southern Methodist University made this research possible through the generous Clements Center-DeGolyer Library Research Travel grant. Thank you to Russell Martin and Andrea Boardman for helping me arrange my trip. At the library Pamalla Anderson and Joan Gosnell helped me navigate the collections during my visit and provided me with support in the years following.

My friends and family: Amanda, our work days kept me going, as did our cocktail hour. Ed and Jenny, thanks for helping me establish myself in SF, without your kindness and support I'm not sure where I'd be. Ed, you gave me a life path to follow. Partly because I want to prove I am as smart as you but mostly because I like being your friend. Brian, thank you for believing in me, giving me balance in my life, and making me feel supported.

But really, none of this would have been possible without the love, support and, encouragement of my parents, Jay and Ermelinda. You have seen the highs and lows and never passed judgment, only provided support and wisdom. If there is anyone in the universe who could possibly be happier that I finally finished, it's you guys.

## **DEDICATION**

*To Mom & Dad: the jerks who wouldn't let me quit when sh\*t got hard. Thanks. I love you.*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	ix
Chapter	
1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
Scope and Thesis .....	1
Purpose/Significance .....	3
Vocabulary .....	4
Chapter Organization.....	10
Historiography .....	13
Note on Sources.....	18
2 MODERNIZATION AND AGENTS OF CHANGE .....	23
Modernization Begins .....	24
Raymond Loewy and The Foley Brothers Department Store .....	40
Gimbels Gets The Raymond Loewy “Magic Touch” .....	54
Neiman Marcus, 1941 and 1953.....	69
3 SEEING CHANGE: “THE PERSONALITY OF A STORE” .....	93
Early Suburban Branch Locations.....	96
“Informality” at Neiman Marcus, Preston Center .....	107
Raymond Loewy Associates’ “Community” Building .....	115
4 VISUAL MERCHANDISING AND MODES OF DISPLAY .....	126
Display Men, Window Dressers, and the First Merchandisers .....	127
Display Before Visual Merchandising: “Scientific Selling” .....	139
Professionalization of Interior Display.....	153
The Introduction of “Visual Merchandising” .....	161
5 “IMAGE BUILDING” IN THE SHOPPING CENTER, THE 1960s.....	176
Differences in Display: Upscale and Mid-Level Department Stores .....	178
From Small-Town Store to National Retailer: The J.C. Penney Company....	185
Together Under One Roof: The NorthPark Mall .....	197

6 CONCLUSION .....	226
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	240



## **ABSTRACT**

This work focuses on American department store interior design and display from the 1930s to the 1960s. Following World War II department store executives reconsidered the layout, organization, and styling of retail spaces and pushed for new, “modern” spaces. Rather than hire architects or rely on store managers to oversee interior display, mid-century retail leaders forged a new relationship with a different type of designer: a trained professional inspired by the principles of industrial design. The principles of industrial design advanced the philosophies of retail design in the mid-century, which shifted to embody aesthetics, functionality, and efficiency. The period shifts informed and shaped the development of “visual merchandising,” which redefined the ways in which retailers measured the power of interior display.

## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

My love affair with department stores began at a young age. Growing up in Connecticut, trips to New York City were part of our routine and almost always included a stop at Saks Fifth Avenue. I was captivated by the glowing interiors of Saks; my younger self loved the store's atmosphere. From the golden doors that were so heavy it took two arms to pull them open, to the bay of elevators with lit countdowns predicting your car's arrival, to the slim escalators that zigzagged through the core of the building, I loved that store. But, the *pièce de résistance* for me: the restroom! After all, that's why we were there in the first place (so my mother claimed); it was almost impossible to find a public restroom in New York City. The ladies' lounge at Saks was a bathroom unlike any other. With plush sofas and personal vanity stations in a room many times bigger than my bedroom, I was in heaven. Surrounded by marble, gold fixtures, mirrors, and floral prints, I felt like a princess in the heart of New York City. To that bathroom, to that Saks location, I credit my love for department stores, big and small.

#### Scope and Thesis

Considered a dinosaur today by many, department stores are almost unrecognizable from their original form. This dissertation will focus on mid-twentieth-century American department store interior design and display from the 1930s to the 1960s. In the 1930s, shopping habits markedly declined as a result of the

economic depression. To counter this trend, retailers began to reconsider the look and feel of their spaces. Calling the efforts “modernization” programs, store managers and owners undertook radical transformations in the appearances of stores foraging ideas from fixture companies, government manuals, and architects—if the budget allowed. Though World War II briefly interrupted this process, the end of the war ushered in new and more sophisticated modernization trends. Embraced across the country by all types of department stores and spearheaded by designers who were inspired by the principles of industrial design, the new philosophies of retail design embodied both aesthetics and function and developed new modes of merchandise display that could only be attained by engaging a new type of designer and strategy. As store planning committees engaged interior and industrial designers, display tactics evolved into more nuanced ways to organize and flaunt merchandise; this led to the development of new practices of what was now called “visual merchandising.” Those responsible for creating retail spaces confronted their task in a new light, moving beyond the simple design of a structure to the task of solving a recurring problem: how to best organize and display merchandise to increase sales, even in aging and seemingly obsolete buildings.

Department store designers including Raymond Loewy, often called the father of industrial design, and Eleanor Le Maire, a pioneer of mid-century retail design, created new spaces and settings that altered the way the retail field considered the physical store. These designers created stores that catered to the needs of both retailers and shoppers through spatial organization, display techniques, and the articulation of a corporate image. They created spaces that fulfilled the desires of both parties, and they significantly influenced retail trends in the United States. The period between 1946

and 1969 brought a myriad of changes in patterns of living and shopping habits; in response, department store designers worked quickly to create new Meccas for urban and suburban shoppers.

### **Purpose/Significance**

The evolution of the aesthetics of the department store in the mid-twentieth century reflects larger cultural shifts in consumer behavior and ways of living. My goal is to understand the agents of change shaping the evolution of department stores to identify the reasons why established businesses spent millions of dollars to redefine themselves. In answering this question, a secondary purpose of this study emerges: to reveal an unexplored link between designers and consumption, beyond the design of an object. In understanding the ways in which designers and department stores joined forces, we can begin to access the ways in which designers manipulated and controlled the atmospheres of stores with a specific goal of encouraging and increasing sales through the propulsion of self-consciously “modern” design. Understanding consumption through this lens adds new complexity to the historiography of design and consumer habits. Design is revealed to be a powerful tool capable of manipulating and altering the actions of shoppers in a specific space—the department store. This idea moves beyond a standard economic analysis or even a study of the physical object to offer a new understanding to how and why consumers choose to spend their money. In other words, this study suggests that design is not simply linked to retail consumption; it is entirely capable of controlling how and where people shop and what they are drawn to purchase. While that concept is generally accepted in today’s consumer society, this study historicizes the discussion.

## Vocabulary

Because the words “design,” “designer,” “modern design,” and “modern” have many connotations, providing working definitions is essential. Overuse and colloquial definitions cloud the original intent of the words and associate them with stylistic properties rather than cultural ideas. This study aligns definitions of these words as closely as possible with each term’s mid-century connotations to achieve a better understanding of that era.

**Design:** Design historian Penny Sparke defines “design” as both the “aesthetic and functional characteristics of an object.”<sup>1</sup> Design historian Philippa Goodall, meanwhile, broadens the definition, calling it a discourse that explores the “knowledges, philosophies, strategies, practices, and technologies forming a field or a regime of sense.”<sup>2</sup> In this study, the term “design” combines both definitions to simultaneously encompass process and strategy as well as aesthetics. This definition aligns with the mid-century usage of the term as well. It highlights that a colloquial use of the word “design,” how retailers or the general public might speak, often only encompassed the aesthetic characteristics of an object. On the other hand, designers themselves (or those trained in the theory of art and design) used the term design to explain a larger process of creative problem solving. In 1953, Sybil Emerson, a professor of art, asked her students to explain the meaning of design and documented their responses in her book *Design, A Creative Approach*. She noted that most students defined design according to a “common misconception” recognizing it as

---

<sup>1</sup> Penny Sparke, "Design," *Grove Art Online, Oxford Art Online*, Oxford

<sup>2</sup> Philippa Goodall, “Design and Gender: Where is the Heart of the Home?,” *Built Environment* 16, no. 4 (1990): 269.

“applied ornamentation...superimposed on the original plan.”<sup>3</sup> Emerson pushed students to think more critically about the *process* of design, ultimately suggesting that design is “the fundamental plan...the bringing together of all elements which serve the proposed end...”<sup>4</sup> Emerson’s mid-century work demonstrates the dual use of the term “design” during the period and how design professionals hoped to employ a more process-driven definition. In the context of this study, the duality of “design” is revealed in the ways in which retailers or reporters discussed the practical design of a department store in comparison to how a designer, such as Loewy or Le Maire, used the term to imply a larger theoretical framework.

**Designer:** A designer is a trained professional who implements the process of shaping spaces and objects according to both functional and aesthetic criteria. The 1958 promotional film *American Look* offers a contemporary definition for “stylists” that informs my usage of the term designer. The film qualifies American stylists as those individuals “who work in lines, forms and textures and colors to give to us the beauty, charm and elegance in the conveniences, comforts and necessities of our daily living.”<sup>5</sup> As the film suggests, mid-century designers were iconic individuals who provided the general public with the conveniences to negotiate the world around them in a visually appealing and affordable way. Some mid-century designers also defined themselves as men (and they were almost all white men) skilled in merchandising and

---

<sup>3</sup> Sybil Emerson, *Design A Creative Approach* (Scranton: International Textbook Company, 1953), 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Chevrolet Presents, *American Look (Part 1)*, 1958, accessed February 23, 2012, <https://archive.org/details/American1958>.

promotion. As American industrial designer Harold Van Doren explained: “A designer with the multiple gifts of artistic ability, mechanical sense, and merchandising wits may become indispensable to his client...The best designed product in the world cannot be sold without clever promotion, nor will it make a profit for its sponsor if it lacks sound engineering and has been made by uneconomical factory methods.”<sup>6</sup> This dissertation incorporates these designers’ self-definitions, respecting their role as practitioners of a multi-faceted profession responsible for functional and aesthetic problem-solving and for the research leading up to it.

**Designed Spaces:** For the purposes of this study, the term “designed spaces” refers to interiors deliberately created to maximize the potential of style and function, promoted in a manner that highlights those properties.

**Modern design:** The term “modern design” in this study refers to the expression of a set of principles and ideas that shaped the look of consumer goods and spaces in the mid-twentieth century. How did influential voices in the time period define “modern design”? In 1950, Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., Curator of the Museum of Modern Art, in New York City, published *What is Modern Design?* a visual and descriptive catalog of objects meeting his definition of the term. Kaufmann lists twelve points of modern design which include the importance of simplicity, function, and ease of mechanical reproduction, writing, “Modern design should blend the expression of utility, materials and process into a visually satisfactory whole.” He argued that “modern design should serve as wide a public as possible, considering modest needs and limited costs no less challenging than the requirements of pomp and

---

<sup>6</sup>Harold Van Doren, *Industrial Design: A Practical Guide* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1940), 17.

luxury.”<sup>7</sup> “Modern design” was considered the mode of production within the initial design problem; designers chose materials and styling that factory production methods could excel at producing. Furthermore, beyond form and function, works of modern design existed as reflections of contemporary life enjoyed by an increasing number of Americans. Reflecting on the birth of the Cold War and postwar prosperity, Kaufmann suggests, “Modern design is intended to implement the lives of free individuals...[It] is more appropriately used to create an atmosphere of ‘the good life’ than of ‘a brave new world.’”<sup>8</sup>

Kauffman’s definition also differed in important ways from earlier concepts of “modern” design that received their first expression in continental Europe following World War I. In “Exhibiting Modernity through the Lens of Tradition in Gilbert Rohde's Design for Living Interior,” Monica Obinski explains the shifting definitions of the “Modern” style in the 1920s and 1930s. Obinski argues that notions of modernity in architecture and design stemmed from the *Art Moderne* movement in the 1920s and 1930s. Its practitioners promoted new materials, new technology, and new modes of styling. However, while the heart of modern design lay in social change, the expression of those ideals also translated into an aesthetic based solely on visual styling.<sup>9</sup> Obinski suggests that Americans adopted “new materials and a different aesthetic vocabulary of geometricizing proportions” but still interpreted modern works

---

<sup>7</sup> Edgar Kaufmann, *What is Modern Design?* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1950), 7.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Monica Obinski, “Exhibiting Modernity through the Lens of Tradition in Gilbert Rohde's Design for Living Interior,” *Journal of Design History* 20, no. 3 (2007): 228.



within a more traditional art historical discourse.<sup>10</sup> The aesthetic styling of designed objects, in turn, became a façade void of the original artistic, idealistic notions of modern design; it was, however, celebrated for its new visual appeal and as an avenue for social change.

In 1950, Kauffman articulated a new definition of modern design rooted in the totality of the designed object from conception to production, aesthetics, consumption, and use. Mid-century Americans could consume objects reflective of this altered concept of modern design that went beyond aesthetic properties, materials, and technology because the objects represented a larger social identity within a culture of middle-class consumption. As Sparke asserted, to indulge in modern design meant to be part of “a lifestyle which embraced all that modern life had to offer, from technologically sophisticated goods to access, for women, to the public sphere.”<sup>11</sup> The modern designs of mid-century America carried with them the idealistic values of postwar life. Consuming those designs or entering a public space defined by them contributed to the shaping of American identity at both the individual and broader social levels.

Kauffman’s definition lacks one key trait that retailers and store designers found was at the core of modern department stores: efficiency. While he hints at the concept by pointing to the importance of notions of function and production, “modern design” in the mid-century American department store hinged strategically on the

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 228 – 229.

<sup>11</sup> Penny Sparke, *An Introduction to Design and Culture, 1900 to the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 7.

concept of efficiency. “Efficiency” had been tied to the notion of “modern” since at least the beginning of the twentieth century, when Frederick Winslow Taylor conceptualized scientific management. Taylor’s system attempted to streamline processes of production to create faster (i.e. more efficient and less expensive) methods of production.<sup>12</sup> As scientific management petered out, efficiency remained a defining feature of modern design.

In mid-century department stores, “efficiency” was a direct result of design, as illustrated by the title of the 1948 book, *Planning Stores that Pay: Organic Design and Layout for Efficient Merchandising*. Author Louis Parnes noted that efficiency was at the core of a “modern” department store; it directly affected a store’s earnings. Indeed, he wrote, an “efficient department achieves the same sales in half the space.”<sup>13</sup> The concept of “efficiency” was also a pillar of industrial design theory, ranking foremost among Loewy’s personal design mantras. For Loewy, the concept of efficiency was more than streamlining a process of production; it involved the integration of time, cost, and space saving measures with an aesthetically pleasing façade. As one newspaper noted of Loewy, “he heads toward efficiency as naturally as he does toward good looks.”<sup>14</sup> Efficiency in the “modern” department store was experienced both by customers, who expected to quickly and easily navigate through

---

<sup>12</sup> Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1911). See Chapter 4, pages 143-144 for a more detailed discussion of scientific management as it relates to department stores.

<sup>13</sup> Louis Parnes, *Planning Stores that Pay: Organic Design and Layout for Efficient Merchandising* (New York: F. W. Dodge Corp, 1948), 61.

<sup>14</sup> “Double Efficiency Featured in Room Designed by Mr. Loewy,” *Deseret News* (Salt Lake City), 25 August 1952.

the store and find merchandise, and retailers, who hoped that well-planned interiors would reduce overhead while encouraging more sales.

This study builds on Kauffman’s definition of the term “modern design” while incorporating notions of efficiency embodied by designers such as Loewy. Throughout, “modern design” refers to objects and spaces designed for consumerism and rooted in ideas of simplicity, comfort, efficiency, and artistic styling informed by function, material, and production.

### **Chapter Organization**

In Chapter Two, “Modernization and Agents of Change,” I examine the ways in which city store owners and managers renovated department store interiors between 1934 and 1953. The chapter commences with an introduction to late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century department stores, considers interwar modernization programs, and focuses on the postwar changes. It uses case studies of Foley’s Department Store in Houston, Gimbels in New York City, and Neiman Marcus in Dallas to illustrate the postwar changes in store design in mid-level and upscale department stores. In the 1930s, department stores and smaller retailers updated their appearances to reflect the trends of “modern” design as they understood them, in hopes of encouraging consumption in a Depression-era United States. With much of the design advice coming from commercial architects, fixture vendors, or government agencies in the early decades of the century, the postwar period illustrates a major shift in who dictated department store design. Beginning in the 1940s, trained designers, and in some cases industrial design experts such as Loewy, began to reorganize and redesign the interiors of stores. These new agents of design considered retail space not solely as a building to house merchandise for sale, but rather as a total design project. The

designers worked to perfect the function of the entire operation including managing stock, controlling traffic, and displaying merchandise. A wave of modernization efforts consumed urban department stores, changing the experience of both providing and purchasing merchandise.

Chapter Three, “Seeing Change: ‘The Personality of a Store,’” explores how designers used interior decoration of department stores to communicate the notion of “personality” in the 1950s and 1960s. “Personality,” a mid-century buzzword, helped suburban shoppers connect with new branch locations in their local communities.<sup>15</sup> The chapter begins with a discussion of early branch locations during the interwar period and uses case studies to illustrate postwar changes in design, including Neiman Marcus’s first branch location (which opened in the sprawl of Dallas in 1951) and work by Raymond Loewy Associates in the Northeast. This chapter argues that designers helped branch locations create strong connections to their immediate communities. Quite different from large city stores that catered to a wide range of consumers, shoppers at suburban branch locations were often racially and economically homogeneous. Designers and trend forecasters speculated on the importance of appealing to the specific local community and creating a comfortable atmosphere in designing the early branch stores. Into the 1960s, articulating personality continued to be an important part of the design process. Instead of tapping into a specific community’s personality, however, a larger concept of suburban

---

<sup>15</sup> Warren Susman, "'Personality' and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture," in *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, ed. John Higham and Paul K. Conkin (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1979), 216; Robert B. Westbrook, “Abundant Cultural History: The Legacy of Warren Susman,” *Reviews in American History* 13, no. 4 (1985): 481-486.

America eventually informed the notion of personality. How and where suburbanites shopped changed; large shopping malls replaced single branch locations, and stores sought to use personality as a branding mechanism to distinguish themselves from competitors when operating side by side in shopping malls.

Chapter Five, “Visual Merchandising and Modes of Display” studies the display revolution that occurred in postwar American department stores. It historicizes the development of display discussions in the first half of the twentieth century and explores the birth of “visual merchandising” in the 1950s. The chapter sets the theoretical groundwork for the visual changes that occurred in the 1950s and 1960s. It explores shifts in the content of literature published for industry executives and incorporates an important case study—the career of J. Ullman Stewart—to argue that department store executives began to consider display as a measurable tool used to suggestively sell goods. The mid-century view towards display supported the career development of individual designers who focused specifically on interior display; it also drove the push towards self-service fixtures, which allowed consumers to largely help themselves. The development of visual merchandising and the new types of display that resulted illustrate how mid-century executives used research to study and test consumer behavior, and ultimately, to significantly augment sales.

Finally, Chapter Six, “Image Building in the Shopping Mall, the 1960s,” illustrates how the covered shopping center pushed executives and designers to define their stores beyond “personality” and consider larger notions of corporate identity or “image building.” The chapter compares interior design and display practices in upscale and mid-level departments stores during the postwar era to illustrate how high-end department stores, including Saks Fifth Avenue, Bergdorf Goodman, and

Neiman Marcus, used interior display to preserve an elevated atmosphere. On the other hand, more modest stores, such as The J.C. Penney Company, neglected to engage with contemporary interior display practices that characterized the 1940s and the 1950s. The introduction of the regional shopping center in the 1960s changed the stratified nature of display by offering a unified collection of stores under one roof. The 1965 opening of the NorthPark Regional Shopping Center in Dallas illustrates how Neiman Marcus and J.C. Penney altered their interior design and display to connect with the larger suburban audience served by the facility. No longer catering only to shoppers already familiar with their department store, designers and executives realized that interior design and display could introduce their store and values to new shoppers visiting the mall. Designers pushed store executives to engage with the larger concepts of “modern” store design which resulted in stores such as Neiman Marcus and J.C. Penney engaging with mid-level department store display concepts; however, while both stores presented familiar interiors to encourage new shoppers wandering the mall to enter, each company used interior display and design to define their company’s image.

### **Historiography**

The historiography of department store studies focuses mainly on economics, labor, and location. Studies often neglect the importance of designed spaces and merchandise display in discussing the social impact of department stores. Despite the absence of scholarship on the close-knit relationships between designers and department stores, the historiography of consumption and department stores offers angles of study that inform the framework of this dissertation. *A Consumer’s Republic* by Lizabeth Cohen, which examines postwar consumer spending in the United States,

establishes the significance of the consumer market in the mid-twentieth century; traces the impact of suburbanization on the consumer market; and posits department stores as a major cultural institution. Cohen also discusses issues of class and gender imperative to discussions of design and consumption.

An important part of this study is rooted in a discussion of the politics of display in consumer venues. A number of scholars have addressed this topic, including Neil Harris and William Leach, who helped define the cultural impact of department stores as arenas for education. Published in 1993, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* by William Leach explores the social and cultural impact of department stores in the late nineteenth century through the 1930s. Leach's work serves as a model for understanding the cultural influence of the visually rich windows, display spaces, and events characteristic of early twentieth-century department stores. Many of the distinctions explored by Leach remain pertinent to this discussion because his work offers a point of comparison for mid-century department stores. His exploration of the creation of a culture of consumption and the importance of design in cultivating desire are important facets of this research.

In *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America*, Neil Harris argues that department stores and museums are similar as venues of cultural influence. Harris explains that the major competitors to museums in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were department stores and world's fairs. The three entities shared commonalities in methods of display, offering "mass encounters with objects of the modern world,"<sup>16</sup> organized material in groups, and an

---

<sup>16</sup>Neil Harris, *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Taste in Modern America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990): 63.

overwhelming amount of goods.<sup>17</sup> Following WWI and the “merchandise revolution,” department stores shifted from displaying all goods on an equal field to highlighting select merchandise and tuning display techniques to elevate one object above another. The method of display encouraged browsing as the visual pleasure of shopping increased under the new system.<sup>18</sup>

The idea of performance and display is a theme throughout Harris’s work, and it relates to Marlis Schweitzer’s analysis of the department store as a stage. *When Broadway Was the Runway* discusses the theatrical nature of early twentieth-century department stores with respect to how stores displayed fashion in engaging and dramatic ways. Schweitzer argues that through fashion shows and extravagant display techniques, department stores delivered lessons on fashion and style trends. Schweitzer focuses on merchandise while Leach and Harris extend their discussions to include the visual atmosphere of store spaces. As a group, these scholars define turn-of-the-century department stores as spaces of entertainment and cultural education.

While less is written on the evolution of department stores in the later twentieth century, a few key works inform the scholarship on that era. In *Selling Good Design: Promoting the Early Modern Interior* (2004), Marilyn Friedman addresses the commercial aspects of modern design and examines the relationships between professional designers, decorators, merchandisers, and consumers. She focuses on the 1920s and explains the fusion of commerce and culture that led to the establishment of department stores as tastemakers and cultural intermediaries. Department stores worked with museums to craft exhibitions of decorative arts and established show

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 60-63.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 66-71, 73.



rooms in which designers and decorators displayed merchandise in situ. While show rooms relied on professionals, they also blurred lines between decorators and consumers as they encouraged visitors to buy even one piece to showcase in their own decorative schemes at home. Friedman's work clearly identifies the role of the department store in educating the public on contemporary design styles while simultaneously urging consumption by cultivating desire. Designer objects, however, remained at a premium price point. The era discussed by Friedman represents the true beginnings of the important connections between designers and department stores. This research pushes Friedman's discussion into later eras and examines the ways in which those relationships grew and changed. I argue that, as branch locations and suburban shopping redefined retailing, department stores employed designers and implemented the concepts of modern design to redefine both consumption and desire. Design itself became not just a selling point, but a commodity consumers demanded both at the level of merchandise selection and in their experience of store interiors.

Jan Whitaker's book *Service and Style: How the American Department Store Fashioned the Middle Class* offers a comprehensive discussion of mid-twentieth-century department stores. Whitaker argues that the mid-twentieth-century department store existed as the venue of "material expression" defining what it meant to be a middle-class American.<sup>19</sup> Her work draws on earlier arguments of the cultural significance of department stores developed by other scholars, including Leach and Harris; she extends their analysis, emphasizing the continued significance of the department store during the mid-twentieth century. However, she redefines the

---

<sup>19</sup> Jan Whitaker, *Service and Style: How the American Department Store Fashioned the Middle Class* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006): 4.

cultural meaning of department stores as places that projected an attainable lifestyle in an era when more people had the means to shop there, as opposed to the lavish and theatrical aspirations presented in turn-of-the-century stores. Her work helps define the cultural importance of department stores in the mid-century and supports my argument regarding the significant impact of design in those spaces.

With respect to building design and location, the work of Richard Longstreth focuses on exterior architecture, space planning, and the suburbanization of department stores during the mid-twentieth century. His highly influential contributions include: "Sears, Roebuck and the Remaking of the Department Store, 1924-42," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 65, no. 2 (2006), *The American Department Store Transformed, 1920-1960* (2010), *The Drive in, The Supermarket, and the Transformation of Commercial Space in Los Angeles, 1914-1941* (2000). Longstreth's *The American Department Store Transformed* is an encyclopedia that concurrently details changes in theory and in the physical landscape of department stores. Longstreth successfully demonstrates that architectural changes reflected in retail environments impacted consumer shopping experiences. His scholarship focuses primarily on architecture and landscape paying some attention to interior function and merchandising within that conversation. I build upon Longstreth's outline, and his work significantly informs this study.

Another key discussion of the importance of location and consumer access to department stores is *Mall Maker: Victor Gruen, Architect of an American Dream* (2004) by Jeffrey Hardwick. Hardwick traces the development of suburban shopping centers through his biography of architect Victor Gruen who is credited with designing the first enclosed shopping mall. Longstreth and Hardwick stress the importance

suburbanization and automobiles had on the development of mid-twentieth-century consumer culture and the growing social significance of department stores during that time. As malls replaced smaller shopping centers, Hardwick established, consumer culture changed extensively due to shifts in how and where people shopped.

### **Note on Sources**

This study is largely informed by primary sources. Due to frequent buyouts and restructuring, it is difficult to locate archives for many major department stores; however, a few key collections exist. Much of the archival research comes from the DeGolyer Library special collections at Southern Methodist University, which holds the Stanley Marcus Papers, J.C. Penney Corporate Archives, and the Alvin Colt Collection. These resources helped outline my work and provided primary source material for my arguments. The archives provide examples of store development, renovations, advances in merchandising, and promotional display. The collections encouraged a diverse look at the American department store in the mid-twentieth century, exploring both small, upscale establishments and national chain stores from an internal perspective.

Stanley Marcus, son of the founder of Neiman Marcus, shaped the growth and success of Neiman Marcus throughout the twentieth century, defining it as a headquarters for fashion and design. His papers include correspondence and reports relating to corporate goals, suburbanization, retail trends, building design, merchandise selection, and the organization's special Fortnight events. Of particular note is the collection of correspondence between Marcus and various store designers, including Le Maire and T.H. Robsjohn-Gibblings, which sheds light on the motivational factors behind store design decisions. This collection included private

conversations between store representatives and designers that revealed motivations and intentions. The Neiman Marcus Archives at the Dallas Public Library also provided photographs of Neiman Marcus stores not held in the collections at SMU.

The J.C. Penney Corporate Archive, also in the DeGolyer Library's collection, houses corporate correspondence, company publications—including *Penney News*, catalogs, and annual reports—as well as a rich collection of photographs of store interiors and exteriors. While limited in personal correspondence, the collection lends insights into the inner workings of a large, national department store chain and the corporate mentality of its headquarters. It also offers significant financial information and hard data tracking the company's growth, expansion efforts, and design strategies.

Designers' papers have also been crucial in understanding the relationship between designers and department stores; they supplement the corporate archives. The Raymond Loewy Papers at the Hagley Museum contain the designer's personal collection, including speeches, correspondence, and the firm's publicity scrapbooks. The scrapbooks have provided an unparalleled collection of press material about the countless department stores designed by his firm. With clippings from newspapers, popular journals, retail trade magazines, and architectural periodicals, the scrapbooks present many different perspectives on the renovation of older stores and the designs of new spaces. An understanding of Loewy's impact on department stores is strengthened by The Raymond Loewy Papers at the Library of Congress, which focus more on the firm's work and contain a number of studies and design proposals. Loewy's work and insight provide a major framework for this dissertation, especially in the first three chapters.

While the Stanley Marcus Papers introduce Le Maire, The Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian hold the Eleanor Le Maire Associates records, 1928-1970. The small, yet rich collection reveals Le Maire's significance in the retail design field and illustrates how her work at Neiman Marcus was part of a larger, national body of work in which she contributed significantly to shaping and defining the standards of retail design.

Three archival collections provided instrumental resources for analyzing visual merchandising and display. The S.S. Silver & Company Archive from the New-York Historical Society provided a collection of photographs, press releases, and correspondence from the prolific store fixture and interior design firm. The firm's work included examples of higher end stores designed by an outside firm that also crafted fixtures. The J. Ullman Stewart Kahn's Department Store Photographs and Ephemera, 1926-1954 papers from the Baker Library Historical Collections at Harvard Business School shed light on the development of merchandise display in the mid-century, specifically by looking at the career of a man who started as a window trimmer and transitioned into the director of display for the Kahn's store in Oakland, California. Stewart's work and career exemplify a larger shift in the trade as stores began to consider interior display as a separate entity.

I also conducted research in a number of archives that I did not use within the dissertation: The Gimbel Brothers Collection at Milwaukee Historical Society, The Marshall Field & Company Archives at The Chicago History Museum, The Strawbridge & Clothier Records and The William Pahlmann Papers in Manuscripts and Archives at The Hagley Museum, Design Research Incorporated Archives at The Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum, Kevin Roche and John Dinkeloo Associates

Records at Yale University Library, and The I. Magnin Records at the San Francisco Public Library. The Alvin Colt collection, also housed in the DeGolyer Library, which is specifically focused on the Neiman Marcus Fortnight celebrations, a yearly themed event in which the entire store transformed to focus on the history, traditions, and crafts of a foreign country also informed my research. Alvin Colt, a New York-based interior and set designer, was the head designer of the Neiman Marcus Fortnights; this collection contains photographs and press releases, as well as sketches and correspondence related to the design and execution of the yearly Fortnight celebrations, and also reports on display techniques from world's fairs and other department stores.

In addition to archival collections, periodicals and publications also offered insight into trade perspectives and trends as well as public perceptions. Retail trade journals contributed news and trends from a merchandising and retail perspective. I consulted *Women's Wear Daily* for coverage on fashion trends and retail news; *Stores: The Bulletin of the National Retail Dry Goods Association*; *Chain Store Age*; *Retail Merchandiser*; *Retail Management*; *Display World* and *Department Store Economist* provided detailed material for analysis. In a similar manner, articles on department stores in business publications including *Today's Business*, *Forbes*, and *Business Week* rendered an economic and business discussion of department stores.

Alternatively, architectural periodicals covered many department store interiors and architecture through the lens of art and design; titles consulted include *Interiors*, *Industrial Design*, *The Architectural Forum*, *Progressive Architecture*, and *Pencil Points*. Finally, local and national newspapers and magazines that appealed to general

public audiences clarified the range and extent to which new buildings and designs were discussed in a general public forum.

## Chapter 2

### MODERNIZATION AND AGENTS OF CHANGE

*Perhaps the only real differences between display men and store designers is the scale of the display and the materials they use to realize a project.*

*William C. Raiser, Assistant to William Snaith, Raymond Loewy Corporation*

In the 1930s, the international design community presented contemporary interiors through exhibitions and fairs, setting new expectations for design. Department stores began to shed their opulent décor and replaced it with more utilitarian selling-floor interiors and facades. Following World War II, the pressure to reinvent the visual vocabulary of department stores grew even stronger, and countless stores renovated existing locations, calling the efforts “modernization” programs. This chapter examines the renovations and re-renovations completed in the mid-twentieth century by top tier practitioners including Raymon Loewy, T.H. Robsjohn-Gibblings, and Eleanor Le Maire, setting them into the context of more general changes in design theory. Beginning with a discussion of redecoration campaigns in retail environments in the 1930s and concluding with an analysis of the postwar trend of renovating downtown retail locations, this chapter argues that department stores increasingly relied on professional designers, as opposed to store managers and fixture sellers, to create visually appealing, modern spaces. Those designers, in turn, acted as agents of change who influenced mid-twentieth-century retail spaces across the United States. The new professionals, informed by modern theories of design, changed both the



operational procedures of department stores and the ways in which stores displayed merchandise. By redefining the meaning of functionality and efficiency in stores, designers helped develop a new definition for scientific selling, and they ultimately provided the impetus behind the concept of visual merchandising. Beyond new interiors that looked stylistically modern and that simultaneously and seamlessly handled merchandise, store floor plans incorporated flexible, open-stock fixtures to encourage unassisted browsing.

### **Modernization Begins**

Late nineteenth and early twentieth-century department stores worked diligently to perfect their layouts and the visual appearance of their displays. Department stores existed in bustling urban areas; these huge buildings sometimes claimed an entire city block and towered more than ten stories tall. With notions of excess at the very core, the stores cultivated their clientele with spectacular displays that layered merchandise of seemingly endless qualities. Wealthier shoppers received personalized service with sales women offering them merchandise selected specifically to meet their needs. Package delivery, childcare, restaurants, and resting lounges were a few of the additional services offered to shoppers.<sup>20</sup> At a time when self-control was valued, the physical spaces bolstered the notions of excess and desire. An image of the Siegel, Cooper and Co. department store from the turn of the century illustrates the opulent décor that defined the larger, early city stores. When it opened

---

<sup>20</sup> For a detailed discussion on early department stores, see William Leach, *Land Of Desire* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) and Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Urbana Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

in September 1896, the store was the largest of its kind in the world. It occupied an entire city block, loomed six stories high, and boasted 125 departments.<sup>21</sup> A thirteen-foot fountain with an allegorical representation of The Republic acted as the defining feature of the main floor. Polished stone columns with carved Corinthian capitals and Classical architectural details surrounded the fountain and extended throughout the main floor. A grand, curved double staircase, reminiscent of a palace, invited shoppers to glide through the space as if they were formally presenting themselves to other shoppers. While escalators did not become mainstays in department stores until the 1940s, the photograph shows that Siegel Cooper constructed one early on, desiring to bring the store up-to-date as soon as possible. This likely occurred after the store's grand opening (as the moving stairway is not described in the article about the inaugural day events) but prior to 1902 when an advertisement described the moving stairways of the bustling store as "incessantly thronged."<sup>22</sup>

A later image of the main floor from 1908 illustrates how the store reorganized display cases to surround the majestic fountain. This new arrangement converted the fountain from a spectacle into a point of sale. Merchandise filled the counters and cases, making it difficult to focus on just one article. A case in the background appears stuffed with small vases with six more precariously crammed on top. Efficiency in this store was equated with the quantity of merchandise on display; retailers believed flaunting more goods led to more sales. Ideas of excess governed display in early

---

<sup>21</sup> "Big Store Thrown Open," *New York Times*, 13 September 1896, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/95413630?accountid=10457>.

<sup>22</sup> "Display Ad 9 -- no Title." *New York Times*, 5 November 1902, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/96191377?accountid=10457>.

stores such as Siegel, Cooper and Co. Architects created grand buildings, and retailers filled the huge spaces with large amount of merchandise to provoke consumer desire.<sup>23</sup>

As the twentieth century progressed, ideas of what constituted a modern department store evolved, along with standard retail practices; store renovations, meanwhile, illustrated the pressure to keep up with evolving trends. In 1908, John Lawrence Mauran (1866 – 1933), an MIT-trained architect who served as president of the American Institute of Architects (AIA), articulated this tension in “The Department Store Plan,” an article for *The Brickbuilder*, an architectural trade periodical.<sup>24</sup> Famous for designing a number of public buildings, including the Grand Leader Department Store completed in 1906 in St. Louis, Mauran represented a key voice in this discussion. The article is important because it is an example of early-twentieth-century discussions about the appearance of department store design, and it was one of the first to outline steps for department store planning in a clear and concise way. Mauran described an application of the early ideas of scientific selling through his attempt to define principles and set rules for selling environments. However, Mauran focused on the building, not the customer. Based on his design for the Grand Leader, he provided a list of five considerations for department stores that he believed were essential to follow. Mauran’s article used his own store as an example, but his conclusions drew on the close study of large department stores in New York City and Chicago.

---

<sup>23</sup> William Leach, “Introduction,” chap. 1 in *Land Of Desire*.

<sup>24</sup> J. L. Mauran, “The Department Store Plan,” *Brickbuilder* 17 (1908): 252-255.

Mauran's five points helped establish a baseline for standard retail store design at the turn of the twentieth century. First, he addressed the building as a whole, including its shape, layout, and street orientation. Deeming rectangular buildings optimal, he advised architects to place entrances on main streets and to locate service entrances in back alleys. This advice pushed readers to consider operations as part of the program of design; it encouraged architects to keep backend operations private and out of the public view. With respect to interior layout, Mauran argued that "the floor plan should be as open and generous as possible, giving extensive perspectives unbroken by stairs, elevators, etc., and never marred by irregular or eccentric columniation."<sup>25</sup> Using Mauran's comments, a close study of his layouts for The Grand Leader, and examples such as Siegel, Cooper and Co., we can begin to understand how Mauran and his contemporaries defined openness in department stores.

An image of the first floor layout of The Grand Leader illustrates how Mauran defined concepts such as "open" and "unbroken." Mauran arranged rows of cases to create a grid-like layout that actually feels quite chaotic and cramped. With a mixture of vertical and horizontal cases, the layout encourages shoppers to walk from front to back and side to side, creating their own path throughout the floor. For Mauran, it appears that an ambiance of openness was achieved by having no walls or separators to divide the space, rather than a floor plan unobstructed by cases. Merchandise organization and layout appeared haphazard compared to stores a generation later. Ladies shoes were adjacent to the soda fountain, along with a collection of random

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 252.

merchandise linked only by its low price and its status of being an easy sale. In the image, the consumer's path through the store is further randomized by the placement of stairs, elevators, and an escalator. The very top of the plan reveals a bank of passenger elevators at the back of the store. Almost situated in the center of the floor, a main stairwell also allows customers to access the upper floors. Along the same horizontal axis, a grand staircase sits to the left, just below another bank of passenger elevators, and a store entrance at the far right includes another staircase for quick access to additional floors by customers entering the store. An escalator blends into the second showcase to the right of the central stairwell, which houses hosiery, buttons, notions, and thread. Situated off-center and only allowing customers to ascend, the escalator appears to be a novelty. The many options for ways to travel between floors reveal that Mauran deliberately neglected to create a clear and direct path for customers. On the upper floors, the escalator is positioned closer to the perimeter, similar to the placement of the elevator, as illustrated by a plan of the third floor. The central stairwell does not continue to the third floor; this forced customers to use the main stairwell on the left or the elevators to the left and top of the plan. The perimeter shows four additional stairwells. Only one, however, located just to the right of the top bank of elevators, appears to be open for customer use. The positioning of the escalator, stairs, and elevators allowed customers to emerge at the perimeter immediately exposing them to store facilities. The plan of the third floor also includes two stock rooms in the middle of the floor and cases that clearly define and sectionalize departments, which clearly disrupts the open feel of the space. The costumes department in the lower right corner illustrates how stock rooms were used to create private spaces for shoppers, acting as barriers to shield the department from

an open view. Mauran’s department store plan aligns with the Siegel, Cooper and Co. store; floors packed with fixtures and merchandise, excessive use of columns, and closed spaces for staff and stock.

Mauran raised two additional considerations—“character of trade,” and “access to floors.”<sup>26</sup> He argued that stores should arrange layout and merchandise display in terms of price and target customer. Mauran suggested filling more accessible areas with standard and affordable merchandise while making sure not to offend the tastes of wealthier clientele—which is quite evident in the arrangement of the first floor of The Grand Leader. The least expensive merchandise, he advised, should be kept in the basement, while more expensive items should be reserved for upper floors, making the main selling areas appealing to a wide range of customers. His advice reinforced the ways earlier department stores structured their spaces by class, attempting to attract and appease wealthier clientele while selling to customers with modest budgets. Mauran’s suggestion that stores place more affordable merchandise within main selling areas may illuminate the beginnings of a larger shift, which reached its peak in the mid-century, where department stores focused on middle-class patrons. Siegel, Cooper and Co. and The Grand Leader both used the main floor to sell smaller merchandise, baked goods, and candies, and to house the soda fountain.

Finally, Mauran listed heating, ventilation, lighting, and cash systems as the final considerations for best practices in department store construction. He argued that, when installed properly, the systems created a pleasant atmosphere in the store.

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

Heating, ventilation, and lighting allowed for comfort while inside the space, and efficient cash systems helped complete sales faster. Although his design for The Grand Leader did not completely disguise the operations of the store, Mauran's article focused on the bones of the store and on the unseen systems that supported a seamless shopping experience. While the article lacked a discussion of factors that later became important in planning, such as styling and materials, Mauran's work suggests that as department stores engaged trained professionals to work on interiors, standards for best practice would develop. Trained designers soon began to replace store managers or salesmen as planners of the interior. They initiated critical thinking about layout, design, and best use of space. Mauran provided a textbook-style discussion to lay down rules and regulations for contemporary builders. A trained architect, his guidance took a utilitarian approach towards store construction and layout with minimal thought on merchandise display. Mauran's discussion highlights that at the turn of the twentieth century, department store architects sought to build a structure for a buyer to shop, and they worked within the standard practices of the retail trade, with a small interest on the styling of the interior. While Mauran's notes highlight a continuity of thought with the mid-century changes, his discussion predates the concept of "scientific selling" and consumer studies. While Mauran emphasizes the importance of store layout and efficient systems to create a more pleasing atmosphere, his discussion assumes customer demand as a given, and he fails to suggest ways to encourage visitation and point of sale consumption.

In a matter of a few decades, department stores owners reconsidered how their operations could create atmospheres of pleasure. As industrial design blossomed as a new profession and European Modernism crept into the international limelight, the

retail trade began to engage in discussions about how to assert its place in contemporary society through the use of modern materials, forms, and ideas. The modernization programs of city stores introduced a more nuanced conversation about the capacity and purpose of modern design. Beginning in the 1930s, the heart of the Great Depression, members of the retail trade hoped updating appearances would increase sales. During that decade, a wave of small, independent retailers also began to think critically about the relationship between store design and sales. Influenced not only by changes in design and style, but also government programming and advice, many retailers made alterations to the look they aimed to create. Fueled by government programs, retail stores began to modernize their facades and interiors. The changes that began to occur in the retail trade at large, including specialty shops and smaller fashion outlets, opened a discussion that helped define a new set of best practices for interior design and merchandising.

In 1934, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) offered loans and other support to small businesses looking to modernize the aesthetic appearance of stores. The government argued that even small updates would encourage spending, which would stimulate the economy during the economic depression.<sup>27</sup> In 1935, a special inset in *The Architectural Record* called *Retail Store Planning* echoed the sentiments of the FHA:

The first problem of the merchant is to attract the attention of potential customers and to give them favorable impressions. Uncluttered surfaces, legible signs, good color selections, intelligent window display and lighting are all undeniable attractions for the exterior.

---

<sup>27</sup> Gabrielle Esperdy, *Modernizing Main Street* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 46-47.



Comfort within based on easy circulation, clarity of plan, accessibility of merchandise, quick service resulting from proper location of stock, effective illumination, good acoustic and air conditioning—all of these will make customers return.<sup>28</sup>

The text and images shown in the article suggest that the first and, perhaps, the best way to attract customers lay in the look of the exterior. The article focuses on exterior display, showing modernized storefronts with large glass windows, updated fonts, and streamlined facades. The article includes eleven depictions of interior layouts or spaces to facilitate conversations about arranging stock and lighting, compared to more than forty depictions of exteriors. Diagrams, meanwhile, illustrate “best practice” exteriors, stressing clear and modern signage as a key feature. The article also selects completed examples of stores to demonstrate the design plans in use, such as the Feltman & Curme shoe store in Chicago, Illinois. In that case, large neon letters in a thin and blocky font accent the flat façade, promoting the store’s name and specialty with a simple yet effective decorative treatment.

While sprucing up an exterior façade may have required less effort and funds, the alterations necessary to incorporate all of the suggested attributes would have required a significantly larger investment of time and money. In fact, it was almost necessary to start from scratch. Not surprisingly, the editors at *Retail Store Planning* used images of sparkling new retail stores whose owners had worked with architects to illustrate their points. For example in the section on lighting, the article includes an image of Fox Store in Hartford, Connecticut. As depicted in the image, the interior appears bright, spacious, and well-lit with new display cases; however, the authors do

---

<sup>28</sup> Frederic Arden Pawley, “The Retail Store,” *Retail Store Planning, The Architectural Record*, July 1935, 52.

not comment on the actual design of the space. While the majority of the images included appear to be of new stores, the text encourages older stores to update, suggesting they, too, could achieve similar results. The list of good design attributes published in *Retail Store Planning* shared similarities with Mauran's ideas from almost thirty years earlier, stressing concepts such as efficiency. This continuity of prose presents a challenge to the historian: over the course of the twentieth-century, many best practice ideas sounded similar, but their visual and physical interpretation differed greatly. Mauran's definition of modern would have appeared dingy and dark compared to those who were attempting to modernize in the 1930s.

*Retail Store Planning* linked "modern" spaces to repeat business and increased spending. Though much of the article focuses on surface design, the text mentions interior design in a few places serving as a harbinger of what would become the hallmarks of mid-century retail design. Part of the modern look came from organization and display: "Display facilities should be subordinate to the merchandise... Similarly color should be used to focus attention on merchandise."<sup>29</sup> The supplement further suggests lowering walls and employing merchandise tables, a change that spoke towards a new emphasis on self-service—an idea that also defined the "super" market of the same era.<sup>30</sup> While minimal, the discussion regarding the

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>30</sup> Self-service in grocery stores began in 1916 with the Piggly Wiggly. Owner Clarence Saunders patented his design for a self-service "supermarket" in 1917. The layout of the store directed a customer's path from the entrance to the exit, allowing each person to select her own groceries along the way. The notion of self-service in department stores is not drastically different than that in grocery stores. While larger spaces, the department store layout also attempts to direct the customer throughout the store, while displays and fixtures offers goods

display of merchandise marks the emergence of a new viewpoint. Over the next two decades, retailers would come to recognize not only the visual importance of the space, but also how the actual arrangement and display of the merchandise informed the store's atmosphere and influenced buyers.

The last page of the July, 1935 issue of *Retail Store Planning* announced a “modernization” contest built upon the potential windfall of the FHA modernization loans. A marketing effort at heart, the Libby-Owens-Ford Glass Company sponsored the Modernize Main Street competition. The contest announcement specifically referenced the availability of funds from the FHA grant program and the benefits accessing them could provide to update retail spaces. The contest judged the best modernization efforts of retailers across the United States. The Libby-Owens-Ford Glass Company invited retailers to apply for FHA funds, consult the company's options for sheet glass windows, and submit images of the new facades to compete.<sup>31</sup>

The contest judged modernization solely on a spruced up exterior. Historian Gabrielle Esperdy argues in *Modernizing Main Street* that such attempts to modernize retail spaces in the 1930s were purely aesthetic. She compares the process of modernization to beauty fads, suggesting the new facades were just that—a facelift

---

for sale. Because handling certain goods might cause damage, and department stores notoriously used salespeople to push goods, self-service shopping did not become commonplace in department stores until the postwar era. For a larger discussion on self-service grocery stores, see Marc Levinson, *The Great A&P and the Struggle for Small Business in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2011) and Henry Petroski, “Engineering: Shopping By Design,” *American Scientist* 93, no. 6 (2005): 491-495.

<sup>31</sup> Retail Store Planning, *The Architectural Record*, July 1935, back cover.

conjured to create the appearance of modernity.<sup>32</sup> Esperdy also notes that, according to FHA Division of Economics and Statistics reports, by 1943, between \$4.25 billion and \$6.8 billion was dedicated to commercial building improvements—or \$58.2 billion to \$93.2 billion in current dollars.<sup>33</sup> As time passed and professional designers became involved in store renovation projects, the goal of modernization appeared to change. Instead of renovating just for looks, designers began to consider efficiency and function as well as aesthetics. Beginning in the 1940s, urban department stores underwent transformations beyond facelifts that altered both the way they looked and how they functioned.

In 1944, an article called “Department Store,” published in *Architectural Forum*, described this shift in the goals of modernization efforts from purely aesthetic changes to a new emphasis on streamlining order and system. The article examined Mangel’s department store in Montgomery, Alabama. Part of a small, national chain, the Montgomery location was originally built in 1928 by architect Morris Lapidus; the store rehired him to guide renovations in 1944. Lapidus earned his architecture degree from Columbia University and focused on retail and resort projects for the majority of his career. Prior to studying architecture, Lapidus practiced costume and theater design. Later in his career, he became famous for his dramatic architectural style, working on a number of hotels in Miami, including the Fountainbleau.<sup>34</sup> The article noted, “Lapidus confesses that all he knew of modern architecture when he designed

---

<sup>32</sup> Esperdy, 167-174.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 221, 289.

<sup>34</sup> Morris Lapidus, *Too Much is Never Enough* (New York: Rizzoli, 1996).

the original Mangel's in 1928 was learned from the then-famous Paris Exposition of Decorative Arts. The job was modern for its time, but he admitted he was glad of the opportunity to remodel the front and interior in accordance with present-day merchandising ideas."<sup>35</sup> Identifying "present-day merchandising ideas" as a driving factor in the redesign, the article revealed that a shift was occurring in how stores and designers considered the role of modern design.

Lapidus altered the exterior façade of the store. The image of the new façade appears taller and brighter, with the store name prominently displayed, as suggested in *Retail Store Planning*. He also made changes to improve the store's interior display and layout, including the creation of more floor selling space. Lapidus expanded floor space by eliminating the stock room as observed in the lower "before" layout. By keeping merchandise on the floor and, in some cases, exposed, Lapidus created more browsing space and altered the way the store functioned. Lapidus also extended the length of the display windows, creating a more seamless transition between window display and the store interior. In doing so, the entire store became an arena for display. Lapidus's ability to alter *his* original plan for the store reflected the evolution of thought within his generation of architects.

In the 1940s, department store modernization plans benefitted from a new wave of ideas that informed the process. As the industrial design profession emerged, new inspiration regarding the relationship of design to consumption also surfaced. Indeed, part of the role of the industrial designer was to create something that fused form and function; the other major task was to encourage consumption. Attempts to

---

<sup>35</sup> "Department Store," *Architectural Forum*, October 1944, 92.

define the profession of industrial designer led to extensive discourse that shaped the role. Kaufmann was a highly influential contributor to the discussion. A member of the Kaufmann's Department Store family in Pittsburgh, he worked as the merchandise manager in the home furnishings department before leaving to become a prominent innovator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. A well-traveled man with training in fine arts and a scholar of Frank Lloyd Wright (his family commissioned Fallingwater), Kaufmann dedicated himself to modern design in the mid-twentieth century. In 1946, while serving as Director of the new Department of Industrial Design at MoMA, Kaufmann described the department and its area of collections expertise in the museum's bulletin. Kaufmann defined industrial design as an application of modern design that focused on professional acuity to design for industrialized markets. Kaufmann argued that designers were first and foremost researchers and problem solvers: "The responsibility of a modern designer thus becomes understanding his problem as thoroughly as he can and solving it as directly as he can."<sup>36</sup>

Other writers discussed at length the connection between design and consumption. J. Gordon Lippincott, a product designer who worked in New York City from 1943 until his retirement in 1969, attempted to define the emerging profession in an article entitled "Industrial Design as a Profession." Lippincott, most famous for his iconic design of the Campbell's soup can, argued, "It is important to realize the industrial designer's primary function is to sell more goods...the primary function of

---

<sup>36</sup> Edgar Kaufmann, Jr. "The Department of Industrial Design," *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 14, no. 1 (1946).

the industrial designer is to create the product that has consumer appeal.”<sup>37</sup> This new school of thought redefined how designers and architects measured the success of their work and how they evaluated the purpose of designs in a consumer society. With respect to retail design, these new attitudes marked an important shift in how designers viewed their work. According to the new principles of modern and industrial design, a successful design could not be judged solely on its aesthetic properties. Good design projects were expected to solve problems, be entirely functional, appear appealing to the eye, and encourage consumption.<sup>38</sup>

While this new school of thought permeated design discourse in the 1940s, Loewy’s work with department stores of the same decade marked a turning point and a re-imagination of the ways in which designers approached department store projects.

---

<sup>37</sup> J. Gordon Lippincott, “Industrial Design as a Profession,” *College Art Journal* 4, no. 3 (1945): 143.

<sup>38</sup> Loewy, who identified himself an industrial designer, used the problem solver approach connected to his field to ensure that his plans for department stores created an environment both aesthetically pleasing and functional for both sellers and shoppers. A 1942 speech he delivered at the Royal Society of Arts summarized his feelings on the importance of function and efficiency in design, which he believed would result in aesthetics calling beauty a “direct result of the combination of simplicity and efficiency.” Raymond Loewy, “Selling Through Design,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 9 January 1941, 43. Loewy’s written proposals frequently cited “efficiency,” “economy,” and “simplicity” as the driving force of his department store design. Raymond Loewy Associates, Foley Brothers Report, no date, Raymond Loewy Papers, MSS62142, Box 107, Library of Congress; Raymond Loewy Associates, Broadway Department Store Report, 1947, Raymond Loewy Papers, MSS62142, Box 141, Library of Congress; Raymond Loewy Associates, Analysis and Master Plan for Gimbel Brothers, 1948, Raymond Loewy Papers, MSS62142, Box 148, Library of Congress; Raymond Loewy Associates, The May Report, no date, Raymond Loewy Papers, MSS62142, Box 151, Library of Congress.

Loewy, considered by many the Father of Industrial Design, was a strong innovator of design; he published the foundational text *Industrial Design* in 1979, near the end of his career.<sup>39</sup> Loewy's department store projects illustrate how the practice and principles of industrial design influenced retail spaces. His work both responded to and informed a new movement in which designers considered all of the principles of industrial design within the department store —aesthetics, function, efficiency, and merchandising. As modernization efforts increased in number and new buildings emerged, every aspect of the department store was shaped by the values of the industrial designer.

The shift towards the new model of design thinking can be seen in trade literature and press coverage of newly designed department stores. Up to that point, architectural periodicals, general press, and even many trade publications focused mainly on aesthetics when discussing new or renovated spaces. Though aesthetics and modern interiors were presented as tools for selling in earlier works, the discussions of Loewy's work in the 1940s through the 1960s deepened the conversation; they began to highlight specific details within interior design which, in addition to beauty, offered increased efficiency and simultaneously augmented the desirability of merchandise. These details—lighting, merchandise organization, stock storage, department layouts, colors, and other factors—were hailed as being the result of design genius blended with intensive consumer research. Loewy and his partner William Snaith promoted themselves not only as great designers, but also as authorities with insight into consumer behavior, because they skillfully bridged the gap between aesthetics and

---

<sup>39</sup>Loewy, *Industrial Design* (New York: Overlook Books, 1979); Loewy, "Selling Through Design."



selling.<sup>40</sup> Aesthetically, Loewy's renovated interiors represented the most fashionable modern spaces with ultra-contemporary conveniences; simultaneously, however, they achieved efficiency and encouraged consumption.

### **Raymond Loewy and The Foley Brothers Department Store**

Following World War II, city stores across the country engaged in modernization efforts to transform their tired spaces into bustling new interiors. While some stores began to open branches in the growing suburbs, retailing remained strong in urban areas; the 1930s modernization trends abruptly halted by the war returned with an updated and imaginative flair. The Foley Brothers Department Store in Houston, for example, completed a renovation that left no inch untouched by change to illustrate novel approaches to modernization. Rather than give its old space a facelift, Foley's built a brand new store, contracting Raymond Loewy Associates; it represented the largest and most complete retail project completed by the firm at the time. The 1947 building epitomized cutting-edge department store design practices and was a testament to the importance of the autonomy of design professionals who were given the chance to plan from scratch. The new store boasted a list of features that exemplified the postwar direction of department store design. While some of these ideas originated in earlier discussions of modernization, the Foley's store exemplified all of the traits of a postwar modern department store in one building. The store design looked stylistically modern; presented a new exterior; considered the importance of

---

<sup>40</sup>The company's numerous reports located in the Raymond Loewy Papers at the Library of Congress illustrate that the firm saw itself as an expert on consumer behavior, conducting research reports that summarized and predicted consumer behavior.

parking; boasted an intricate system of merchandise distribution; included new flexible, open-stock fixtures; and had a modern visual and physical atmosphere created by new technologies. The *New Yorker* hailed the store as a modern venue that would surely set the standard for department store design: “Foley’s is to be *the* modern department store—windowless, totally mechanized, with a garage, Raymond Loewy interiors, everything the customer’s heart can desire...”<sup>41</sup>

In 1946, the city of Houston boasted a very healthy economy, with the city’s net effective buying income significantly outranking comparable southern cities. A report by the Houston Chamber of Commerce estimated the net effective buying income of Houston residents at \$805,911,000. Houstonians’ buying income significantly outranked Dallas and Atlanta, which both hovered just below and above \$650 million, respectively. The report also noted that Houston’s average net family income was \$4,576, which ranked twenty-five percent higher than the average for the United States and fifty-six percent above the Texas average.<sup>42</sup> Raymond Loewy Associates used this report to guide plans for the store.

The new Foley’s building allowed Raymond Loewy Associates to demonstrate new ideas without the constraints of an existing space. The new twelve million-dollar building had an efficient plan for managing and delivering stock, a layout that

---

<sup>41</sup> “Our Footloose Correspondents,” *The New Yorker*, 13 March 1948, Raymond Loewy Archive (RLA), Accession 2251, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 8, 1964-1963, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

<sup>42</sup> “Population, Retail Sales and Effective Buying Income in Leading Southern Cities,” Report compiled by The Houston Chamber of Commerce and included in “Facts on Foley’s,” n.d., Raymond Loewy Papers, MSS 62142, Box 173, Library of Congress.

controlled consumer traffic, and an upgraded atmosphere including improved lighting and air-conditioning—a boon in Houston’s muggy climate. Fred Lazarus Jr., president of Federated Department Stores, masterminded the plan for the new, larger building. Lazarus saw growth potential in the Houston market after a visit to the city in the early 1940s and negotiated a deal to purchase Foley Brothers (at the time a dry goods store with less than seven million dollars of volume) by promising an expansion.<sup>43</sup> The promises Lazarus made to the Foley brothers came true in the form of a brand-new building and direction for the older store.

One reporter noted that while customers were “probably not aware of the part scientific research has played in lightening their burden, they are quick to take advantage of the many innovations which make it easy for them to buy in this brand new Federated store.”<sup>44</sup> *Business Week* and other publications marveled at the many “radical designs to promote merchandising.”<sup>45</sup> William Raiser, an assistant to Snaith, later described the project as one of the firm’s best: “The first large city store to be built after the war, and one in which a major goal of the management was to reduce

---

<sup>43</sup> Clipping, *Retail Management*, 14 June 1948, Raymond Loewy Archive (RLA), Accession 2251, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 8, 1964-1963, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

<sup>44</sup> Clipping, *Today’s Business*, April 1948, Raymond Loewy Archive (RLA), Accession 2251, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 8, 1964-1963, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

<sup>45</sup> “New Store, New Methods,” *Business Week*, 18 October 1947, Raymond Loewy Archive (RLA), Accession 2251, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 8, 1964-1963, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

operating costs by offering attractive self-service [selection] in the majority of departments.”<sup>46</sup>

Raymond Loewy Associates devoted time to studying the inner workings of the business and prepare a plan to allow for growth. The plan assessed every detail, from receiving stock to layout and display of merchandise. In an undated slide presentation given to a group of sales promotion managers, Lowey’s partner Snaith noted, “We based our thinking, not on how big the store was to be nor how it was to look, but on how it was intended to operate.”<sup>47</sup> The firm’s goals for Foley’s centered on notions of efficiency, which was unsurprising given Loewy’s background in industrial design. The plan noted specific goals for the first floor:

1. To create a first floor which would be economic (sic) to operate.
2. To give the impression of maximum customer activity.
3. Create an atmosphere in which it is easy to shop.<sup>48</sup>

While the list of goals seems obvious, its presence actually suggests that studies and detailed preliminary reports from design firms were new for department store executives.

The look of the building was novel. The large, monolithic, structure with a minimally adorned exterior and no windows beyond the street-level display windows

---

<sup>46</sup>William C. Raiser, Speech, n.d., Raymond Lowey Papers, MSS 62142, Box 180, Library of Congress , 2.

<sup>47</sup>Transcript of William Snaith slide presentation, no date or location, Raymond Lowey Papers, MSS 62142 Box 173, Library of Congress.

<sup>48</sup>Merchandise Planning Report, Foley’s Department Store, c. 1947, Raymond Lowey Papers, MSS 62142, Box 147, Library of Congress, 1.

represented a new kind of department store architecture not seen in previous urban stores. Kenneth Franzheim (1890-1959), a prominent Houston architect, designed the structure. Franzheim was most well known for his work in downtown Houston, though he also designed a number of buildings in New York City. Following World War II, Franzheim worked with a number of other Houston companies helping to redesign the downtown with structures in addition to Foley's. While his early work embodied the art deco movement, in his later years, Franzheim appeared to embrace the principles of modernism, employing materials such as concrete and steel and designing buildings that suggested functionality and efficiency.

Raymond Loewy Associates worked closely with Franzheim to ensure his structure fully supported their plan for Foley's. In retail press coverage, Raymond Loewy Associates received the majority of the design credit.<sup>49</sup> Even though a large team of architects and builders participated in the process, the Foley's building was presented as a package designed by Raymond Loewy Associates. When the building opened in 1947, *Retail Management* called the design "striking," noting its distinct

---

<sup>49</sup> News Clippings, Raymond Loewy Archive (Accession 2251), Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 8, 1964-1963; "Planned Merchandising Pays Off," *Today's Business*, April 1949; "Building a Greater Foley's," *Retail Management*, July 1947; "New Products," *Journal of Commerce*, 18 December 1946; "New Foley Brothers Constructed at a Cost of 10,000,000," *Playthings*, July 1947; "Retail Trade: Foley's New Look," *Time*, 3 November 1947; "New Store," *New Yorker*, 26 September 1947; "Work in Progress," *Architectural Forum*, April 1947; "Federated Foleys," *Newsweek*, 8 November 1947; "Environment Keys New Foleys," *Retailing*, 4 September 1947; "Retailing Meets Its Tomorrow," *Women's Wear Daily*, 22 October 1947; "Department Store," *Progressive Architecture*, July 1958.

look.<sup>50</sup> The design was novel for department stores; the building responded to popular styling in modern architecture, upholding a modernist aesthetic with functionality and efficiency taking precedence over decoration. The materials—concrete and steel—also made Foley’s a modern statement. The store even included an adjacent parking garage connected to the main store by an underground tunnel. The ability for customers to easily park next to the store and use a tunnel to enter eliminated the primary hassle of shopping in the city—parking. The new focus on auto-mobility and ample parking was an idea that would later flourish in suburban centers.

Notions of efficiency and functionalism, suggested by the modern exterior, continued into the building’s interior. The main floor layout shows a plan specifically organized to efficiently direct shoppers, which satisfied the three goals discussed by Snaith. With a receiving and stock room placed in the left corner, the rest of the floor remains open. A grid-like layout of cases creates pathways on the sales floor without obstructing customers’ views of the entire floor. The vertical and horizontal case layouts are uniform by sections, which encourages customers to walk either side-to-side or front-to-back through the space, but discourages shoppers from customizing their path through the floor. The design positions escalators in the center of the floor, stairs at the upper and lower-left corners, and passenger elevators at the customer entrance on Dallas Ave (bottom of plan). With more limited options on how to travel between floors than the earlier Grand Leader, the customers’ path is dictated by the layout. The openness of the first floor continues on the higher floors. An image of the

---

<sup>50</sup> “Foley’s of Houston,” *Retail Management*, June 1947, Raymond Loewy Archive (RLA), Accession 2251, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 8, 1964-1963, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

second-floor plan shows stock rooms, service spaces, and restrooms that line the perimeter of the upper floors. The old Foley's housed stock rooms in the center of the floor, which prohibited customers from seeing the entire sales area. While much more open than the original store's layout, the plan reveals that the departments that lined the perimeter of the floor used walls to define their boundaries. The plan feels reminiscent of Mauran's Grand Leader; however, from the central escalator, customers could view the entirety of the floor, and see into each department.

Raymond Loewy Associates attempted to create a layout that allowed for maximum efficiency in store operations. They described the plan as having "been designed to adapt the production line technique of the factory to the field of retailing, and to cut the ratio of service employees behind the scenes in non-selling capacities, reducing overhead and lowering prices."<sup>51</sup> The store interior design dictated the movement of merchandise through the store. Raymond Loewy Associates specifically included a system of stock rooms, freight elevators, and dumbwaiters to quickly move stock through the building. A large warehouse adjacent to the parking garage held excess stock and allowed store associates to seamlessly deliver purchases to customers. After a purchase, customers could pick items up at a claim desk on their way to their car; packages were sent via chutes to the claim desk. *Architectural Forum* called the design an attempt to "express modern merchandising methods rather than glorify the architectural or decorative approach."<sup>52</sup> The publication further explained

---

<sup>51</sup> "Facts on Foley's."

<sup>52</sup> "Work in Progress," *Architectural Forum*, April 1947, Raymond Loewy Archive (RLA), Accession 2251, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 8, 1964-1963, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

the design as “the logical product of a series of exhaustive technical studies on merchandising and department store operation.”<sup>53</sup> For customers, meanwhile, one reporter argued that the new layout afforded “instant access to their entire range of merchandise.”<sup>54</sup>

The new building’s layout also showed novel advances in merchandise arrangement, including tools to create flexibility and manage customer flow through the space. Snaith described the intentions of the first floor layout:

We created a major aisle system leading from the main doors with horizontal aisles. While there are arguments in favor of aisles paralleling the major flow of traffic, the other arrangement is preferable when there are many departments to be represented. The parallel arrangement blocks the corners. Another reason for the horizontal plan—selling is taken off the main aisles during peak periods when traffic bottlenecks are likely to occur.<sup>55</sup>

Snaith’s discussion revealed some of Raymond Loewy Associates’ thought processes modifying the layout to encourage and manipulate the flow of traffic. Another consideration, the desire to expose consumers to the largest number of goods possible as they moved through the store, was expressed in Snaith’s comments regarding escalator placement: “By centering the escalators we get comprehensive coverage spreading out from the discharge points.”<sup>56</sup> Though not a new technology, the

---

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> “Federated Foley’s,” *News Week*, 3 November 1947, Raymond Loewy Archive (RLA), Accession 2251, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 8, 1964-1963, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

<sup>55</sup> Snaith slide presentation.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.



placement of escalators in the center of the floor was a new concept. The Grand Leader and Siegel, Cooper, and Co. did have escalators placed alongside the perimeters of the floor, though they appeared to be more of a novelty. Placing escalators in the center of the sales floor changed the way consumers moved through the space. With the ability to carry up to eight thousand customers per hour, the escalators directed traffic from north to south, or upwards to each floor. With respect to merchandising, the major benefit of escalators was that the store had, as *Retail Management* put it, “no dead spots.”<sup>57</sup> In using the escalator, customers could see the expansive offerings of each floor. Or, as *The Department Store Economist* explained, the central escalators created a “focal point for traffic aisles...Customers are exposed to maximum merchandise areas as they travel up by escalator.”<sup>58</sup> *Business Week* explained that a primary difference between the new Foley’s and other department stores was the “flow of customer traffic” as controlled by the escalators.<sup>59</sup> The use of escalators as a tool to direct customer flow distinguished Foley’s from earlier stores and from Mauran’s ideas for best practice in store planning. Though the store still had elevators to serve the “carriage trade” customers or high-end clientele who disliked the

---

<sup>57</sup> “Foley’s of Houston,” *Retail Management*, June 1947, Raymond Loewy Archive (RLA), Accession 2251, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 8, 1964-1963, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

<sup>58</sup> “A New Spirit and Faith...Architect considers escalators a major element of store design,” *Department Store Economist*, 1947, Raymond Loewy Archive (RLA), Accession 2251, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 8, 1964-1963, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

<sup>59</sup> “New Store, New Methods,” *Business Week*, 18 October 1947, Raymond Loewy Archive (RLA), Accession 2251, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 8, 1964-1963, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

exposure of escalators, escalators were the primary mode of transportation in the store.<sup>60</sup> Loewy also preserved a limited set of more traditional store interiors to appease higher-end clientele. A photograph of The Crystal Shop, located on the third floor next to formal eveningwear and furs, illustrates a stark contrast with the layout and design of the main level. The department feels more intimate and upscale than other departments. Partially enclosed by walls and merchandise, it is also decorated with crystal chandeliers and includes elegant seating areas flanked by side tables and lamps. Glass cases house the handbags and accessories while mannequins parade fashionable outfits. In this department, the image suggests, shoppers had to ask salespeople for help and rely entirely on customer service to view and select merchandise.

Outside of The Crystal Room, the new layout and customer flow encouraged the store's overall efficiency; customers were directed to wander around and shop "without assistance of salespeople."<sup>61</sup> "Efficiency" appeared to have two definitions; first, to achieve a seamless system of merchandise distribution throughout the store; and second, to reduce the number of salespeople needed to help a single customer. The self-service aspect of shopping was one that Raymond Loewy Associates frequently promoted in their building designs. In their Merchandise Planning report for Foley's, the firm argued against the traditional glass-fronted display cases:

It is our aim to eventually obtain the maximum flexibility in fixtures and we firmly believe that in most instances the present day showcase

---

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Clipping, *Today's Business*, April 1948, Raymond Loewy Archive (RLA), Accession 2251, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 8, 1964-1963, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

or glass box does not generally fit the picture. In place of this showcase we expect to arrive at a fixture that will greatly increase the amount of merchandise visible to the customer, thus affording the maximum of self-selection. Furthermore, it does more efficiently call to the customer's attention the fact that you have the merchandise.<sup>62</sup>

Raymond Loewy Associates believed that self-service fixtures encouraged shoppers to help themselves to move more merchandise than they might have purchased under the watchful eye of sales help.

Photos of Foley's interior depict glass cases and a relatively open floor plan. The selling floor appears less crowded than earlier stores that contained repetitive architectural supports and heavy merchandise displays. *Retail Management* specifically noted that the store's modern columns promoted less congestion and offered more selling space because entire departments remained unobstructed, while the lower ceilings offered a more "intimate" atmosphere. While the space seemed more appealing to customers, the design more likely followed contemporary architectural protocol rather than actively attempting to create a sense of intimacy.

While novel at Foley's, the new horizontal layout represented a conception of flexible design that later came to define suburban department stores.<sup>63</sup> Raymond Loewy Associates designed fixtures for these stores as movable and interchangeable

---

<sup>62</sup> Merchandise Planning Report, Foley's Department Store, c. 1947, Raymond Loewy Papers, MSS 62142 Box 147, Library of Congress, 6.

<sup>63</sup> A concept discussed at length by Richard Longstreth in "Sears, Roebuck and the Remaking of the Department Store, 1924-42," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 65, no. 2 (2006). Longstreth notes the development of horizontal stores as opposed to older, vertically inclined spaces, arguing that car culture and the development of suburban lands offered more space to builders, who chose to build out instead of upwards.

units. A novel concept, modular units allowed for “quick and easy rearrangement.”<sup>64</sup>

In its planning report for the store, the firm explained:

It is our plan to give every consideration to flexibility in equipment as we study the details of the store fixtures. We have in mind a module system affording the opportunity of using one given fixture for the maximum number of merchandise lines with a maximum of adjustment of addition to same...In addition, it is our intention to develop a fixture giving the maximum in display of merchandise and encourage self-selection.<sup>65</sup>

Critics deemed modern fixtures a success; both *Architectural Forum* and *Progressive Architecture* magazines highlighted their importance. As a diagram in *Architectural Forum* illustrates, new cases could be rearranged and stacked on a uniform base, which could also be moved along with the sales floor. The units depicted in the image feature crisp, geometric forms in simple wood and metal, with glass on multiple sides. Flexible layouts allowed stores to rearrange displays and refresh departments as seasons changed and new merchandise arrived. *Progressive Architecture* commended Raymond Loewy Associates’ design for a simple, adjustable clothing rack. The easy to install, adjustable rack offered an open-stock display technique that was used to house a majority of the store’s clothing inventory. This type of unit facilitated customer self-service, displaying merchandise in ways that allowed shoppers to browse unassisted. Employees arranged merchandise according to size and color for ease of browsing. Efficiency was achieved as customers perused and selected merchandise on their own, only requiring a sales assistant to complete the purchase.

---

<sup>64</sup> “Work in Progress,” 108-109.

<sup>65</sup> Merchandise Planning Report, Foley’s Department Store, c. 1947, Raymond Lowey Papers, MSS 62142 Box 147, Library of Congress, 3.

The desire to create a more organized and easy-to-navigate store also informed the placement of departments. Under the guidance of Raymond Loewy Associates, the new Foley's grouped merchandise together in what the media described as revolutionary ways. *Progressive Architecture* depicted the store's organization positively because it "oppose[d] the 'baffle' technique of store layout that confronts customers with a miscellany of merchandise, willy-nilly."<sup>66</sup> Floors were separated by price point, and merchandise was grouped by type then further separated by size. Organizing merchandise by price alone was not a novel concept. Earlier stores included "bargain basements" which housed lower-priced merchandise, and, as displayed by the floor plans of The Grand Leader and Siegel, Cooper, and Co., the first floors often held less expensive items. The newness of Foley's lay in the intricate organization within departments (sorting by color and price) and new merchandise grouping that characterized the main level. All women's accessories and cosmetics were moved to the main floor to allow women "to go quickly and easily" to the most popular departments.<sup>67</sup> This novel grouping spoke to efficiency and customer convenience, as well as to the store's merchandising goal of offering consumers easier access to their most desired products.

The Foley's modernization plan also considered the physical, atmospheric qualities of the space. Conveniences such as air conditioning and lighting design

---

<sup>66</sup> "Department Store, Houston, Texas," *Progressive Architecture*, July 1948, Raymond Loewy Archive (RLA), Accession 2251, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 8, 1964-1963, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE .

<sup>67</sup>"Foley's of Houston," Raymond Loewy Archive (RLA), Accession 2251, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 8, 1964-1963, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

created an elevated shopping experience by creating a more comfortable store atmosphere. “Of course it’s air conditioned,” *Retail Management* stated.<sup>68</sup> Foley’s ability to control the interior temperature created an escape for shoppers from the hot and humid Houston weather. An advertisement for cooling systems in *Business Week* used Foley’s as the exemplar of a “modern” department store: “In the modern department store York cooling creates the atmosphere for sales.”<sup>69</sup> Air conditioning was represented as a staple for modern store design capable of creating an atmosphere of ease and comfort that aimed to bolster sales.

Along with air conditioning, lighting was considered as an important factor in creating a pleasant shopping atmosphere. *Illumination*, a trade publication on lighting design, called Foley’s “America’s Store of Tomorrow” because of its novel lighting design. A combination of incandescent and fluorescent bulbs eliminated the need for natural lighting, making the windowless building possible. Photographs reveal how Foley’s illuminated each department according to its specific needs. In the image, the men’s department (top) used overhead lights that provided general illumination for the entire space. The rug department (middle) combined overhead lights with closer fixtures that spotlighted rugs on display and allowed customers to see individual items in better light. The women’s salon (bottom) illustrated the effective use of lighting to create dramatic merchandise display. A large, decorative chandelier accenting the ceiling pocket lighting elevated the tone of the department from the rest of the store.

---

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Advertisement, York Cooling, *Business Week*, 31 January 1948, Raymond Loewy Archive (RLA), Accession 2251, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 8, 1964-1963, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

Lighting defined the merchandise and created a striking theatrical mood throughout the new Foley's. Special lighting filled shadow boxes that drew attention to certain merchandise, and wall sconces beamed enticingly on specific areas. While fluorescents offered ambient lighting, the introduction of incandescent lights allowed the store's display artists to redirect, dim, and focus light beams. A report from Foley's suggested that the combination of fluorescent and incandescent lighting mimicked natural hues, allowing customers to "see merchandise as it will actually appear outside in daylight."<sup>70</sup>

The modernization of Foley's in Houston represented an important moment in department store design. Foley's brought together trends only imagined by other stores in the 1940s; it exemplified with sophistication how the principles of industrial design might inform department store planning and aesthetics. The project allowed Raymond Loewy Associates the ability to explore and interpret ideas of modern efficiency, modern aesthetics, and modern convenience and to establish those as the firm's design hallmarks. Through the flagship new Foley's, Loewy and Snaith redefined modern department stores and created novel expectations for retailers and consumers. They pushed other department stores to continue modernization efforts, leading them to consider efficiency and convenience as priority goals.

### **Gimbels Gets The Raymond Loewy "Magic Touch"**

The firm's work at Foley's brought Raymond Loewy Associates national acclaim. While they had already made a name for themselves completing small

---

<sup>70</sup>"Facts on Foleys, Lighting System," 1947, Raymond Loewy Papers, MSS 62142, Box 173, Library of Congress.

projects in department store interiors, the Foley's project showed how the firm's designers could handle an entire store. Stores across the country reached out to Raymond Loewy Associates for help renovating old spaces and designing new ones. The 1949 renovation of Gimbel Brothers Department Store in New York City stands out as a prime example of the firm's work in this area. A close look at the project illustrates how Raymond Loewy Associates carried over a number of similar ideas—perhaps the most successful—from Foley's to Gimbels and revealed that a brand new building was not entirely necessary to achieve a modern department store. An image of the first floor, taken in 1951, highlights the Raymond Loewy Associates' style. The renovated main floor in Gimbels boasts an open and expansive floor plan and a modern styled interior with pared down decorative details and selective merchandise displays. While the main floor still employed closed selling with cases that required sales personnel to retrieve merchandise for consumers, other floors used open shelving and self-selection.

Internal reports and documentation outlined Raymond Loewy Associates' commitment to helping Gimbels streamline internal operations and create an efficient selling space, characterized by convenience. In preparation for the renovation, the firm submitted a detailed report of the store in 1948 that considered factors such as department size and location, amount of stock on and offsite, and internal operations. The report detailed the goal of the project: “to enable that store to meet the challenge of the future and continue the growth which was so outstanding during the war.”<sup>71</sup> The

---

<sup>71</sup> Raymond Loewy Associates, “Analysis and Master Plan for Gimbel Brothers, New York City: An Analysis of Existing Departments to Determine Their Potential Volume, Area, and Future Location,” 1948, Raymond Loewy Papers, MSS 62142, Box 148, Library of Congress.



plan studied Gimbels extensively through observation and discussions with managers, buyers, and sales personnel, and compared findings to overall national department store trends in order to make suggestions on where to expand and how to structure the store.

From 1948 to 1951, press coverage surrounding the \$2.5 million renovation of Gimbels emphasized two key aspects of the new interiors. General press coverage stressed the aesthetic appeal achieved by Loewy's genius, while architectural and trade publications noted how the new spaces facilitated and encouraged sales.<sup>72</sup> While neither angle fully captured the extent to which Raymond Loewy Associates changed the internal workings of the store, many articles did focus on the atmosphere of efficiency and convenience. With the new interior, the store shifted its image from a cost-conscious retailer to a fashionable and modern department store. Respecting Loewy's diligence to present the store fashionably, advertisements stressed the

---

<sup>72</sup>The Raymond Loewy Publicity Scrapbook Volume 8, 1964-1963 (RLA) contains a number of articles and advertisements related to the Gimbels renovation. While some clippings are removed from their original source, identifiable press coverage included: "\$7 Million Says Gimbels is Right," *Women's Wear Daily*, 14 February 1950, Section 1; "Gimbels Will Shift Emphasis in Advertising," *Women's Wear Daily*, 7 February 1951; "Gimbels Makes Salesracks Act As Salesmen, You Can Do the Same," *Men's Reporter News Weekly*, 21 November 1949; Milt Kristt, "Good Old Gimbels Becomes Elegant and Efficient," *Notion and Novelty Review*, December 1949, 79-81; "Streamlining and Flexibility Give 'New Look' to Gimbels, New York, Gift Department," *Giftwares and Housewares Magazine*, December 1949; "Color Adds Smartness to Department Stores," *Western Paint Review*, August 1951; "Gimbels Remodeling Lends New Ideas to Other Stores," *Children's Ready to Wear*, 31 August 1951; "Gimbels Unveils New Fur Salon," *Women's Wear Daily*, 21 September 1951; "Cinderella on Broadway," *Department Store Economist*, January 1951. I have further cited and engaged with many of these articles in my discussion of Gimbels.

trendiness of the new spaces.<sup>73</sup> In October 1949, an advertisement in the New York Times illustrated the company's success joining panache with price-effectiveness:

Plain old Gimbels used to be as plain as the nose on your face... But along came Raymond Loewy, the ace industrial designer, and changed all that. Raymond Loewy is a genius in design. He's a genius in cash-saving efficiency. What has he done to Gimbels? He's made us pretty as a hen's egg. But he hasn't forgotten our penchant for thrift. Underneath our Cinderella trapping we're the same simple girl we've always been. Just look at our plain, thrifty, price tags and see!<sup>74</sup>

While describing the new interior as “pretty,” the advertisement still stressed the store's history as a “thrifty” retailer for customers of moderate means. Yet, the trendy building was touted as a fashionable space designed by a top-tier designer. The Gimbels' advertisement suggested that it was Raymond Loewy's design “genius” that helped the company shift from an old-style model to a more contemporary space.<sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>73</sup>In the article “Gimbels Will Shift Emphasis in Advertising,” *Women's Wear Daily*, 7 February 1951, Sylvia Sheppard covered Gimbels' new advertising campaign that worked to rebrand the store writing: “But, for the new and more elegant era that designer Loewy has brought to the store, some of this new splendor will reflect in the ads.” Another *WWD* article covered the new advertisements: “Ads Worth Quoting,” *Women's Wear Daily*, 14 December 1950. The Raymond Loewy Publicity Scrapbook Volume 8 contains a selection of advertisement clippings including: “I Was a Nobody but Nobody,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 11 December 1950; “Isn't That A New Floor You're Wearing Dear?” *New York Herald Tribune*, 28 January 1951; “A Valentine to Our New Street Floor,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 4 February 1951; Advertisement, *New York Times*, 28 January 1951; “A Street Floor Named Desire,” *New York Times*, 23 February 1951; Advertisement, *The New York Times*, 18 February 1951.

<sup>74</sup>Advertisement, *New York Times*, 6 October 1949, L:18., Raymond Loewy Archive (RLA), Accession 2251, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 8, 1964-1963, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*

The tone of the Gimbels advertisement resonated with others published from 1949 to 1951, suggesting how executives wished to portray Gimbels to an audience of shoppers.<sup>76</sup> The advertisements stressed that Gimbels set the bar for a standard of design through the new and modern atmosphere, which made it one of *the* fashionable places to shop. The claims made by Gimbels imply that customers may have associated modern interiors with more expensive retail establishments. This may be why Gimbels insisted that the new interiors, while modern, did not exclude the customer base to which they traditionally catered; the updates only created a more exciting place for thrift-conscious New Yorkers to shop.

While advertisements suggested that the company feared changes might alienate loyal customers, the retail trade press voiced none of those fears and focused on Gimbels' success. Trade press coverage focused on increased sales figures that resulted from changes in layouts and floor plans, colors, lighting, merchandise storage, and signage throughout the store. While retail trade publications acknowledged the design of the new store was beneficial to business, the articles barely scratched the

---

<sup>76</sup>One advertisement in *New York Times*, 11 December 1950, 7, Raymond Loewy Archive (RLA), Accession 2251, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 8, 1964-1963, personified the Gimbels building as a dowdy woman who testified, "I was nobody, but nobody, until I tried the Raymond Loewy success course." The old store was described as plain, dowdy, and bulging at the seams, while the renovated store was long and lean, with a shawl blowing in the wind, "beautiful, streamlined, graceful as a little gazelle, and twice as frisky." Another advertisement in *New York Herald Tribune*, 28 January 1951, Raymond Loewy Archive (RLA), Accession 2251, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 8, 1964-1963 proclaimed: "Of course, this fancy face-lifting was expensive, but it was worth it....when you consider that now we're twice as efficient, twice as much fun to shop in and (most importantly) just as thrifty!"

surface on the extent to which Raymond Loewy Associates had consciously and strategically planned and redesigned the operations of the store.

In 1950, *Women's Wear Daily* highlighted Gimbels' updated interiors with an article titled "\$7 Million Says Gimbels Is Right." Focused on their increased sales figures, the article made reference to the Raymond Loewy Associates plan and identified Loewy as the design genius who had wholly laid the path of the modernization program. The article explained that Loewy surveyed the entire business before creating a three-part plan to move forward. First he opened up selling floors and tore down partitions that cut up the space. Then, he moved stockrooms from the warehouse across the street to the selling floors, or he housed merchandise within fixtures because as he stated, "stock is part of the selling function."<sup>77</sup> Finally, he laid out departments so wall fixtures carried staple stocks and promotional goods were housed in flexible displays in the center of the floor. The *Women's Wear Daily* account of the renovation highlighted the new ways in which a designer might work with a department store—an important conversation for the trade that moved far beyond interior aesthetics and tapped into the extensive planning that strategically shaped the Gimbels' design.

Some of the improvements were considered merely technical, others were qualified as aesthetic; all, however, were described as deriving directly from Raymond Loewy Associates' goal: to create a space possible of expanding and capitalizing on

---

<sup>77</sup> Herman Radolf, "\$7 Million Says Gimbels is Right," *Women's Wear Daily*, 14 February, 1950, Section 1, 86, Raymond Loewy Archive (RLA), Accession 2251, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 8, 1964-1963, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

mid-century department store consumer growth. Raymond Loewy Associates wrote of the old design, “That while in many aspects the physical structure is admirable, through the years and the method of meeting current exigencies has resulted in a patch-work of layout which does not suit the traffic to its fullest capacity nor permit the operation of the store to function with economy.”<sup>78</sup> The new store layout shifted the ways in which store associates and shoppers experienced the space. Retail publications hailed it as both aesthetically appealing and convenient. *Giftwares and Homewares Magazine* noted, “The new layout affords sweeping vistas of the vast floor, which is divided into intimate little specialty shops by variations in pastel coloring to correspond with each new department.”<sup>79</sup> The layout, however, was much more than an aesthetic solution. Space planning, which ultimately determined a customer’s path through the store, was achieved through arrangement of departments and fixtures, and placement of escalators and elevators. Raymond Loewy Associates’ plan for Gimbels main floor highlighted this new, more open and accessible main floor. The firm arranged the store to have merchandise displayed against the perimeter walls, with a grid of display cases marking the selling floor. No walls obstructed the main selling floor, and fixtures remained low enough to avoid obstructing an expansive view. As the image reveals, elevators were situated at the rear of the store

---

<sup>78</sup> Raymond Loewy Associates, “Analysis and Master Plan for Gimbel Brothers, New York City: An Analysis of Existing Departments to Determine Their Potential Volume, Area, and Future Location,” 1948, Raymond Loewy Papers, MSS 62142, Box 148, Library of Congress, 3.

<sup>79</sup> “Streamlining and Flexibility Give ‘New Look’ to Gimbels, New York, Gift Department,” *Giftwares and Homewares Magazine*, October 1949, Raymond Loewy Archive (RLA), Accession 2251, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 8, 1964-1963, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

(right side of the plan) and on each side (upper and lower walls of the plan). Two sets of escalators spaced evenly across the horizontal access of the store, apparently carried passengers to upper and lower levels. Raymond Loewy Associates' plans for subsequent floors display the concept of openness in another way. The plan for the third floor, which contained women's sportswear, blouses, furs, dresses, coats, and suits, displays a very different layout from the main floor and highlights how escalators positioned shoppers to see the entire sales floor. Perimeter walls depicted in the plan form a kidney shaped layout of the sales floor. Raymond Loewy Associates reserved the perimeter space for store functions, such as housing excess stock, receiving merchandise, and women's alterations. The center of the sales floor boasts an open layout with an orientation encouraging circular movement through the space. A few walls separate the departments around the edges, including dresses, furs, coats, and suits. The fur department, notoriously one of the most expensive departments within the women's section, appears the most isolated. Despite walls on each side, the dresses, coats and suits departments remains connected to the open central selling floor.

The firm believed that the layout of the old store hindered the movement of traffic throughout, which was detrimental to sales. The new floor plans used the perimeter on upper levels for store work spaces to keep the sales floor more open while also creating a better flow with escalators. Raymond Loewy Associates suggested in their report that Gimbels move "at least one escalator," so that "up traffic would move by and contact more departments before leaving the first floor" and traffic "would have less chance to jam up in front of the escalators;" subsequently,

“the center and rear of the floor would come more into visual contact with traffic.”<sup>80</sup>

Strategically, the images reveal, one escalator was located on the left to facilitate travel either upstairs or downstairs when shoppers entered; another was positioned on the back side to bring customers down to the main floor. The down escalator faced the majority of the main selling floor, allowing customers to see the variety of merchandise as they graciously descended. The depiction of the right side of the store also contains a set of escalators to allow customers to visit the basement shop or proceed to upper floors. In other words, when riding up or down the escalator, a complete view of the entire sales floor was still possible. The firm’s plan also suggests orienting the merchandise islands North to South on the main floor as opposed to East to West in order to help separate through traffic from selling spaces.<sup>81</sup> While the firm wished to make the store look appealing, they intended the new layout to increase traffic throughout the store, with an ultimate goal of increasing sales and profits.

In addition to creating a layout that encouraged better customer movement and more open sales floors, Raymond Loewy Associates crafted a plan for a more efficient movement of merchandise through the space. The layout of the third floor shows dedicated areas for receiving and marking stock, as well as specialized elevators that delivered merchandise behind the sales floor walls. The Flow Chart included in Raymond Loewy Associates master plan for Gimbels outlines exactly how the store would receive, direct, and distribute merchandise throughout the floors, as well as how it would prepare and send items to customer delivery. The right hand side of the

---

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 8.

diagram shows the new loading dock through which all soft goods entered the store. Arrows indicate how goods destined for the basement level went directly to the basement stock room, while employees circulated via freight elevators to deliver goods to the appropriate floors. The “Apparel R&M” section of the third floor of The Flow Chart coincides with the Ready to Wear Receiving and Marking section on the upper right hand corner of the third floor plan. Raymond Loewy Associates intended for the plan to create a keenly efficient operation.

While the designers stressed efficiency, trade press coverage gushed over the store’s new look, vividly describing the ways the new space looked “modern” and catered to customers by mobilizing decoration, lighting, and a vibrant color palette. The shift from an opulent to a more straightforward and functional design was also widely noted. In 1951, *The Department Store Economist* scrutinized the store department by department and floor by floor, publishing a detailed article titled “Cinderella on Broadway.” It described the transformed space as “[a]rranged for the benefit of its customers...decorated to please the customers, not to awe them. From front door to back, from street level to the roof, it is a store prepared to serve, prepared to make shopping a pleasure.”<sup>82</sup>

Loewy’s design used light and color to help separate departments and highlight merchandise. The combination of having the most current technology in a stylistically modern space situated Gimbels as a premiere retail venue and a leader in the field. *The Department Store Economist* specifically noted that the lighting design was directed by a fifteen-month study of the store’s interior. “The choice of the lighting system for Gimbels main floor came by longer consultation and investigation than any other

---

<sup>82</sup> “Cinderella on Broadway,” *Department Store Economist*, January 1951.



phase of the modernization...illumination is not only an adjunct to aesthetics but more necessary as a matter of utility.”<sup>83</sup> The article noted that this part of the project was led by the merchant, store designer, and lighting designer to ensure proper merchandise display and a “pleasing visual pattern the customer enjoys when buying at Gimbels.”<sup>84</sup>

Raymond Loewy also significantly transformed the store’s color palette, and reviewers highlighted this change. Color, combined with lighting, was not only used to create a new aesthetic appeal, but it also directed the customer to different departments throughout the store.<sup>85</sup> Loewy’s new approach to color added brightness and facilitated interior flow, making it easier to navigate the store and shop. Based on the press coverage, it is my assumption that previously, the department store interiors had a fairly uniform and limited color palette, as was standard practice in early-twentieth-century interiors.<sup>86</sup> The needlework department on the fifth floor

---

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Lynn Hardesty, “Color Adds New Smartness to Department Stores,” *Western Paint Review*, August 1951, Raymond Loewy Archive (RLA), Accession 2251, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 8, 1964-1963, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

<sup>86</sup> See “Cinderella on Broadway,” Hardesty, “Color Adds New Smartness;” Milt Kristt, “Good Old Gimbels. Figures 4.5 and 4.9, Hinterlieter’s Department Store in Allentown, Pennsylvania and McCreery & Company in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, show that in the early twentieth century, use of color in department store interiors was limited. The walls of Hinterlieter’s were painted a blue-gray, while at McCreery & Co., the floors were green and the back wall appears blue-gray while the rear right wall appears light pink, though it is difficult to ascertain if these colors represented reality or the artistic hand of the colorizer. Even still, the interior color palette was restricted to very few colors, which could explain why articles repeatedly mentioned the new extensive color palette in the updated Gimbels.

exemplifies these changes. It combines a pastel color palette with a contemporary lighting plan to create a vivid environment in which to shop. The tones of the wood, floor, and walls kindle and reflect the light. The department is clearly labeled “Knitting Yarn” on a backlit sign hung high enough to be seen from across the floor. Rather than an overhead light for the entire department, each display unit has a set of hanging pendants with globes illuminating the merchandise. The wall unit appears to have built-in lighting above to further provide light to shoppers. The space feels open, as the height of the fixtures stops below eye-level. The department even has natural light beaming in from the windows—a rare, if not singular occurrence in the store—to support the instruction table where customers could work on knitting projects and receive help from sales associates.

The fixtures, themselves, in the needlework department are noteworthy. They facilitate the methodical arrangement of yarn by color and type. An article in *Notion and Novelty Review* described the department as having “modern self-service fixtures and an abundance of merchandise all in plain view.”<sup>87</sup> The new fixtures held ninety percent of the merchandise, and the ease of self-selection allowed Gimbels to reduce the number of sales personnel needed in the department. In the photograph, the fixtures appear to replace sales people “for easier selling and easier buying.”<sup>88</sup>

Articles reiterated coverage of Gimbels ease of self-selection through modern fixtures illustrating the impact such fixtures had on a shopper’s experience at Gimbels. The new fixtures incorporated ubiquitously throughout Gimbels by Raymond Loewy Associates stored excess stock in the open, in an organized fashion, and encouraged

---

<sup>87</sup> Kristt, “Good Old Gimbels.”

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

customers to browse unassisted. The new fittings also shaped the store's layout, eliminating the need for most stock rooms that previously took up sales space; they also provided a flexible floor plan that adjusted to seasonal buying patterns. Additionally, some displays could hold such a large amount of merchandise that even off-site warehouses were no longer necessary. One type of fixture in the men's department held 225 pairs of pants. An article highlighted this along with other racks that held 100 suits calling the structures "salesmen."<sup>89</sup> The system of racks and stands permitted the arrangement of merchandise by size and color as well as the storage of the majority of the store's stock; simultaneously, the collection of fixtures resourcefully led customers to select and pick out their own merchandise and take it to the cash register for purchase. The new method of storage both informed the more open layout of Gimbels and created new form of convenience for shoppers; no longer did bustling customers have to wait for sales personnel to check for stock in a back room or to call the warehouse.

Based on the documents associated with the project, it is likely that Raymond Loewy Associates pushed Gimbels towards self-service fixtures. One of the problems that the firm intended to solve in its modernization program was the "high operating costs due to expensive methods of handling merchandise."<sup>90</sup> While one component of the solution lay in creating a better system of distribution from the warehouse to the store, including stocking more items on site, the other lay in the reorientation of stock

---

<sup>89</sup> "Gimbels makes Display Racks Act as Salesmen; You Can Do the Same," clipping, Raymond Loewy Archive (RLA), Accession 2251, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 8, 1964-1963, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

<sup>90</sup> Raymond Loewy Associates, Gimbels Report, 4.

on the sales floor through the increase and expansion of self-service fixtures. Raiser, assistant to Snaith, noted in a speech to sales promotion managers, “Undoubtedly the trend in merchandising is self-selection. This is not isolated to store operating with low priced (sic) merchandise.”<sup>91</sup> As part of the Gimbels redesign, many floors received new fixtures entirely, while the first floor incorporated both new and renovated fixtures for an estimated total budget of \$1.9 million, or about \$18.5 million today.<sup>92</sup>

The trade press probed Gimbels about the success of the new fixtures and overall atmosphere. The *Notion and Novelty Review*, *Giftwares and Homewares Magazine*, *Children’s Ready to Wear Magazine*, *Women’s Wear Daily*, and *Department Store Economist* all considered the new fixture forms and layout as a way to save time for both the customer and seller, and to speed up the sales process. *Women’s Wear Daily* reported that the renovated departments performed twenty percent better than the average retail sales figures indicated by the Federal Reserve. Joseph L. Eckhouse, head of the store, attributed twenty five percent of increased sales to the new fixtures.<sup>93</sup> Following the renovations, managers in the shoe department, dress department, and lingerie department all reported increased sales as well as sales growth in higher priced goods. Marcia Marray, buyer of moderate priced dresses, told the *Department Store Economist*, “Streamlining the appearance of the department with proper lighting, show cases and fixtures makes the merchandise look better and sells

---

<sup>91</sup> Raiser, Speech, 3.

<sup>92</sup> Raymond Loewy Associates, Gimbels Report, 38.

<sup>93</sup> Radolf, “\$7 Million.”

better merchandise.”<sup>94</sup> She also noted that in November 1950, the department sold more \$29.95 dresses, the highest priced in the department, than ever before.

While later store interiors worked towards a more efficient, self-service environment, Gimbels strengthened the groundwork for self-service concepts in Raymond Loewy Associates designs and provided a novel talking point for press coverage. Raymond Loewy Associates committed itself to the benefits of self-service fixtures and frequently sang their praise. In 1961, while working on a project with The May Company, the firm once again pushed for self-service fixtures. Their position regarding self-service fixtures twelve years later highlighted their continuity of thought and suggested that the transformation to self-service fixtures had required a significant amount of pressure. Raymond Loewy Associates’ discussion also brought to light the competition between mid-level and low-cost department stores:

We cannot emphasize too strongly the necessity for extending the self-service, checkout approach to both the Downtown and full-scale branch stores. While it is almost a certainty that “discount” stores will change their merchandising and operating methods in the years which lie ahead, it is equally certain that their “low-cost, efficient” impact will remain. They have demonstrated positively that the consumer is willing to buy almost any type of merchandise on a self-service, check-out basis.<sup>95</sup>

Here the firm identified the concept of self-service fixtures that allowed self-selection and a central check-out as acceptable to the consumer, even in mid-level department stores such as The May Company’s holdings. Raymond Loewy Associates identified a

---

<sup>94</sup> “Cinderella on Broadway.”

<sup>95</sup> “The May Report,” 1961, Raymond Loewy Papers, MSS 62142, Box 173, Library of Congress, 111-20.

consumer pattern that revealed a positive reaction to self-service fixtures rather than a negative, low-cost association. In order for mid-level stores to compete with low-cost outlets, the firm “strongly” emphasized “the necessity” for self-service.<sup>96</sup>

The new interior of Gimbels suggested what was possible for department stores in New York City and across the country, even with the constraints of an existing space. Associated with a celebrity designer, the space demonstrated that the most modern and fashionable retail spaces could also be machines for selling. The store’s advertisements identified the interior as a fashion makeover. “Raymond Loewy made our street floor the most chic, the most elegant street floor that ever sold a powder puff. It wasn’t easy...all of this bringing out the inner us. But we succumbed. We fell for the soft muted lighting...the graceful yet streamlined designs...the lush and the plush,” an ad stated.<sup>97</sup> Snaith later said of the final design, “It’s not the best looking job we have turned out, but it is one of our best solutions to a problem.”<sup>98</sup> Snaith’s comment on the project highlighted it as a work of industrial design—a “solution to a problem.”

### **Neiman Marcus, 1941 and 1953**

The highly publicized work of Raymond Loewy Associates changed the way designers thought about planning department stores. The early modernization goals that worked first and foremost towards aesthetic appeal were replaced by designs that

---

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Advertisement clipping, *New York Times*, 28 January 1951, Raymond Loewy Archive (RLA), Accession 2251, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 8, 1964-1963, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE. .

<sup>98</sup> Snaith slide presentation.

encompassed the larger concepts of industrial design theory, such as functionality and efficiency. Designers looked beyond the façade and considered the inner workings of the store to create efficient and convenient spaces that allowed for easier selling. Two renovations that occurred at Neiman Marcus in 1941 and 1953 illustrate this shift in design thinking and also show how upscale stores treated modernization projects differently than larger stores seeking clientele with a more modest budget.

A comparison of the two Neiman Marcus renovations highlights how some of the ideas set forth by Raymond Loewy Associates permeated national department store design. The first renovation in 1941 concentrated on the aesthetics of the store, while during the second in 1953, the designer pushed the store to consider functional aspects as well. In the postwar era, renovation efforts at Neiman Marcus and department stores across America focused on how to use visual merchandising to cultivate desire and increase purchases. Design morphed into a measurable tool for selling.

In 1941, The Neiman Marcus Company completed an extensive renovation to its store, then still the sole location. While their building and its interiors had never fallen in disrepair like some other retail establishments investing in renovations in the 1930s, the styling of the store lacked the streamlined flair overtaking the retail world. Located in Dallas, Neiman Marcus was founded in 1907 as a specialty store that catered to local clients. Known for its high quality merchandise, the store's reputation as a leader in fashion and quality situated it as a premiere shopping destination in the Southwest. As the company strengthened its catalog offerings in the 1930s, the store gained national acclaim as a specialty store appealing to an affluent clientele. The

Neiman Marcus brand became synonymous with quality and luxury—characteristics the store interior needed to reflect.

In 1941, under the leadership of Stanley Marcus, Neiman Marcus completely updated their interiors following many of the popular modernization trends “from basement to penthouse.”<sup>99</sup> Stanley Marcus (1905 – 2002), the eldest son of the store’s founder, Herbert Marcus, played a pivotal role in shaping the store’s brand. After graduating from Harvard University in 1925, Stanley Marcus joined the company. In 1935 he became executive vice president, and after his father’s death in 1950, he assumed the role of president. Marcus’s personal and company papers reveal his involvement in crafting the Neiman Marcus brand, which included the look and feel of the retail stores.

While the whole store received a facelift that year, media attention focused mostly on the second-floor women’s salon, likely for its dramatic feel and celebrity designer. Darveed, the design firm of T.H. Robsjohn-Gibbings, directed the renovations of the second floor. A British born, but New York-based architect and interior designer, Robsjohn-Gibbings committed himself to influencing American preferences, writing frequently on "good design" and informing the national discussion on the properties of good taste. Robsjohn-Gibbings contributed significantly to the development of the American modern style in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>100</sup> In his book *Goodbye Mr. Chippendale* (1944), Robsjohn-Gibbings

---

<sup>99</sup>Zula McCauley, *Neiman Marcus: The First Fifty Years* (Dallas: The Company, 1957), 30.

<sup>100</sup> Daniella Olhad Smith, "T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbings: Crafting a Modern Home for Postwar America," *Journal of Interior Design*, 34, 1, 39.



encouraged readers to do away with historic ornament and to embrace simplicity and functionality in design—just what he did for Neiman Marcus.

Press coverage of the 1941 redesign of Neiman Marcus in Dallas exemplifies what popular media deemed most interesting or important about department store modernization projects. Neiman Marcus's first renovation updated the store's 1914 building. The building's selling floors consisted of formal interiors designed in an Italian Renaissance style. Its original architecture and interior design followed the conventions of bustling department stores contemporary to its construction, evoking the feel of an ornate palace with expensive stone, distinctive architecture, and carved details. *The Greater Neiman Marcus Company*, a booklet from 1927, included descriptions and sketches of the store's old-world interiors. Even the elevators had "portals of Roman travertine, which repeat the carved motifs of an old well-head in the Piazza del Duomo at Pienza Italy."<sup>101</sup> On the second floor, the opulence increased with a "foyer graced by a fountain, into the shallow bowl of which dolphins and swans playfully spout crystal jets of water."<sup>102</sup> The booklet's drawings depict ornate details: carved column capitals, arabesque patterned borders, carved groin vaults, and delicate furniture.

A photograph of the first floor prior to the 1941 redesign shows the heavy, carved fixtures that enclosed and displayed goods. The dark wood cases include intricately carved front panels atop which sit the glass cases. Behind the counters are either card catalog-like drawers, to keep reserve stock, or illuminated shelves for

---

<sup>101</sup> E.M. Heitman's, "The Greater Neiman-Marcus Company" (printed speech) 3 October 1927, 10.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

enhanced merchandise display. The fixtures exemplify turn-of-the-century department stores. The Victorian-style fixtures also controlled how customers shopped. They forced customers to engage with sales personnel to examine and purchase merchandise. Visible on the right side of the photograph, a lonely, modern display fixture sits in the aisle creating an interest point to seize the attention of customers. Likely purchased much later than the dark wood fixtures, the case includes a metal or wood base with thin, rectangular legs and rails. With a lighter, more refined feel than the older fixtures, the small display case illustrates the changing offerings from fixture manufacturers. During that era, heavy, carved wood cases gave way to lighter and more delicate pieces; this small fixture points towards the stylistic direction that Neiman Marcus would follow in the decades to come.

As popular styling shifted away from ornate décor, Neiman Marcus sought to update the selling space. In 1941, the company engaged in a massive renovation to strip the store of its dated interiors. The resulting interior appeared lighter and brighter, more open, and “new.” Images of the first floor after the 1941 renovation show subtle changes focusing on updated display cases and stripping the spaces of older architecture.

The first floor and the men’s department, redesigned by Le Maire, who would later become a key figure in the redesign of Neiman Marcus, also reflected the general move towards updated aesthetics. Le Marie focused her changes on the fixtures. Images of the updated display cases on the main floor and in the men’s department lack the heavy, ornate details found in the original fixtures; they appear to have acted less as pieces of furniture and more as venues for display. While dark wood was still used, the newer fixtures eliminated heavy carved panels. Instead flat, unadorned

panels made up the case construction. The updated main floor also appears to use more glass cases, and the frames that support the glass seem to employ thinner, more geometric pieces of wood. The fixtures behind the counter, meant to hold excess stock, are transformed from tall, drawer filled units to glass cases for merchandise display that sit atop a shorter unit of drawers. The updated interior also pared down the amount of merchandise on display. In the earlier photograph the merchandise appears packed into the wall units, in the updated photograph, the merchandise arrangement appears less cramped and chaotic. Overall, the space became more modern, brighter, better lit, and less ornate. To shoppers, the store's renovation appeared different than the original interiors, and it received acclaim from both internal sources and architectural publications. A company history exclaimed, "After nearly four decades in store keeping—here is the new Neiman Marcus...spacious, beautiful, subtly lighted."<sup>103</sup>

While the entire store saw major changes in 1941, architectural periodicals focused on Robsjohn-Gibbing's second floor design, while Le Maire's work went largely unmentioned. The narrow reporting on the store's redesign suggested that the time period prioritized aesthetics and designer recognition over function and efficiency, upholding male designers as newsworthy figures. Working with architect Rene C. Brugnoli, but specifically responsible for the interior design, Robsjohn-Gibbing stripped the second floor of its historicized ornament and created a sleek interior featuring flat surfaces and clean geometric lines. Photographs of the redesigned space show walls and ceilings of a single color or wood tone finish with

---

<sup>103</sup> Zula McCauley, *The First Forty Years: A Chronology of Growth and Events written Expressly for Neiman Marcus* (Dallas: The Company, 1947), 28.

much of the carved woodwork removed. The store's new furniture echoed the changes as well. As opposed to opulent, carved Louis XVI style, Robsjohn-Gibbings chose reinterpretations of neoclassical and Danish modern furniture styles. Rather than ornate lighting fixtures, the new design employed floating or inset square-lighting fixtures against a smooth, flat ceiling. To create a well-defined yet open space, Robsjohn-Gibbings used a glass wall, a clear reference to modern architecture. Robsjohn-Gibbings' spaces focus on architecture and décor with limited merchandise in sight, suggesting that he viewed the spaces as architectural feats, rather than selling floors.

Correspondence between Robsjohn-Gibbings and Stanley Marcus further suggests Robsjohn-Gibbings' attitude towards the store design. In one letter from Robsjohn-Gibbings to Marcus, the designer urged the store owner to be sure to mention his name in publicity about the remodel because, as he noted, "It seems to me that my name would have good prestige value for you."<sup>104</sup> He continued to offer his advice to Stanley Marcus on how to take advantage of the remodeling project to build business: "I need hardly tell you that your merchandise is already famous, but no one has ever been told anything very much about the physical aspect of the Neiman Marcus store. I think now is the moment to build the prestige of this."<sup>105</sup> Rather than focus on how his design might sell merchandise, Robsjohn-Gibbings positioned the

---

<sup>104</sup> Letter from Robsjohn-Gibbings to Stanley Marcus 28 July 1941, Stanley Marcus Collection, (Collection A93.1869), Box 216, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.

<sup>105</sup> Letters from from Robsjohn-Gibbings to Stanley Marcus 20 July and 17 October 1941, Stanley Marcus Collection, (Collection A93.1869), Box 216, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.

look of the space itself and its designer as an influential factors in the store's image and reputation.

An article, which Robsjohn-Gibbings submitted himself to the architectural journal *Pencil Points*, offered a purely aesthetic review of the new space, comprised mainly of photographs with short captions describing specific design features.<sup>106</sup> Another article in *New York Decorators Digest* took a similar stance with its discussion of the interiors. The piece articulated the different departments within the space, noting that the store “is characteristically straightforward, for it is smartly simple, in excellent taste and all backgrounds are designed to render the merchandise the most important feature, making the items stand out as jewels to be viewed individually, without confusion.”<sup>107</sup> However, the images of these spaces seem to show no merchandise whatsoever, which creates uncertainty around the ability of Robsjohn-Gibbings' interiors to highlight merchandise and encourage consumption. Another image of a seating area appears more like a modern art gallery than department store. Included in the press photos, the image shows a modern painting above a sofa, chairs, and a coffee table. A photo caption identifies the wood as bleached oak and the upholstery as beige.<sup>108</sup> Both articles described the interior as a

---

<sup>106</sup> Letter from Robsjohn-Gibbings to Stanley Marcus 17 October 1941, Stanley Marcus Collection, (Collection A93.1869), Box 216, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University; ; “Merchandising Background by Rene C. Brugnoni and T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbings,” *Pencil Points*, December 1941.

<sup>107</sup> “Simplicity in Department Store Design,” *New York Decorators Digest* 17 (November 1941): 25.

<sup>108</sup> Photograph caption, Terence Harold Robsjohn-Gibbings Papers, 1898-1977, Archives of American Art, Box 1, Folder 44, Smithsonian Institution.

masterpiece of artistic interior design, rather than an efficient retail space designed to sell. This treatment of the space suggests that the ideas of efficiency and merchandising had yet to permeate Neiman Marcus.

Only twelve years later in 1953, Neiman Marcus completed a total renovation of its interior design in the downtown Dallas location. The company both expanded its building and updated the interiors to engage with rapid changes in department store design. Unlike the company's earlier project with Robsjohn-Gibbings, the 1953 renovation, led by Le Maire, considered more than just modern aesthetics. This second modernization project reconsidered the function and merchandising aspects of the space, in addition to the visual qualities. As a company history noted of the 1953 renovation, "The store had indeed become a better store, for it provided our customers with the increased services we had long dreamed of, in a store made more beautiful and convenient from first floor to sixth."<sup>109</sup> In an open letter from Stanley Marcus to the general public from October 1953, Marcus stressed the new feel of the store as the "rebuilding program" came to a close. He noted customers may not recognize the new layout, "We have had to do a certain amount of changing of locations in order to develop a new merchandising idea we had—to locate related departments next to each other for easier and more convenient shopping."<sup>110</sup> He continued to discuss the store's efforts stating, "We have tried to build a store for TODAY with an eye to tomorrow and a hand on the tradition of yesterday."<sup>111</sup> Marcus's thoughts on the new space

---

<sup>109</sup> McCauley, *The First Forty Years*, 65.

<sup>110</sup> Letter from Stanley Marcus, 19 October 1953. Stanley Marcus Collection, (Collection A93.1869), Box 6, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.

highlighted the store's attempt to consider the function of the retail space. Neiman Marcus joined the ranks of other department stores and began to emphasize efficiency and convenience in design.

To conceptualize, manage, and execute the changes, Neiman Marcus hired Le Maire who had worked with the store since the late 1930s. She became the Neiman Marcus in-house designer, charged with constantly updating and maintaining the interiors of the downtown location and new branch stores as they opened. Based in New York City, Le Maire worked as an interior designer from the 1920s until her death in 1970. The principle designer of a firm bearing her namesake, Le Maire's work included residential and commercial spaces, such as The New Yorker Hotel and Busch Stadium in St. Louis. All but forgotten today, Le Maire was most famous as a premiere designer of retail spaces working on a lengthy list of high-end stores including Bullock's in Los Angeles, Rich's in Atlanta, The Emporium in San Francisco, Burdine's in Miami, and Mary Sachs, L.P. Hollander, Elizabeth Arden, B. Altman, and Forbes & Wallace in New York. A biography disseminated by her firm spoke to the breadth of her work on store interiors:

One of the country's foremost designers, and the first woman to enter the field, is internationally known for her daring and creative use of color as an architectural form. Her name is synonymous with glamour and drama in fashion presentation; probably no other person in America has done more to turn the trend of retail merchandising from the old routine of merely "selling merchandise" to the modern creative approach of "presenting fashion."<sup>112</sup>

---

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Eleanor Le Maire, Designer of Rich's Store For Men, c. 1951, Eleanor Le Maire Associates Records, 1928 – 1970, Box 1, Smithsonian Archives of American Art.

Le Maire positioned herself as a leader in merchandising and display. She understood fashion and had the ability to construct a beautiful interior that existed to sell the goods within it and to cater to the needs of both the customers and the business. She wrote that “the designer’s responsibility goes far beyond merely designing a beautiful setting which embodies the newest and finest ideas of store layout and décor.”<sup>113</sup> Le Maire’s work exemplifies this quotation, as her interior design considered the “newest and finest” as notions of efficiency and function, in addition to aesthetics.

Her first retail project in 1928 with Bullock’s Wilshire established Le Maire as an important player in the field. Le Maire worked as the art director for Bullock’s Wilshire department store in Los Angeles, contributing significantly to its art deco interiors. Though the building is now remembered for its architect and not its art director, Le Maire’s work with Bullock’s Wilshire represented a milestone in her career and defined her ability to create groundbreaking retail interiors. A number of articles on the widely publicized store noted Le Maire’s work on the interiors, which signified new recognition that retail interiors should be treated by a trained interior decorator as opposed to an architect or store manager. Following her big break, Le Maire continued to work with architects and design retail spaces. Indulging in Art Deco styling and incorporating the opulent ideals of early -twentieth-century stores, Le Maire’s designs were detailed, ornate, and often over the top, yet they worked to create a space that functioned for both sets of users: the stores and their customers. Le Maire’s interiors at Bullock’s Wilshire were linked to high fashion; they established her as a fashionable designer, which made her a desirable choice for Neiman Marcus.

---

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 2.



In 1941 Neiman Marcus awarded Le Maire with the Neiman Marcus Award for Distinguished Service in the Fashion Field for her work on retail interior design. Having just completed work for Neiman Marcus and engaged to continue working with the store, it is no surprise that the store wished to highlight her expertise and genius. As her firm noted of Le Maire's work, "Neiman Marcus were among the first of America's outstanding stores to commission Miss Le Maire to plan and create contemporary interiors for them."<sup>114</sup> In her acceptance speech for the award, Le Maire spoke of the challenges faced by designers, giving credit to the stores with which she had worked for allowing her to complete her designs. She stated, "No matter how many beautiful plans the designer creates, they are no satisfaction to his aesthetic soul, nor any use to the world, unless someone lets him carry them out."<sup>115</sup> She discussed the evolution in how retailers perceived their stores, noting the "transition from the 'we-sell-clothing' to the 'we-present-the-new-fashions' approach."<sup>116</sup> Le Maire's speech highlights her own philosophy as a retail interior designer, revealing her interest beyond the look of the space and to the interior's ability to showcase and sell merchandise in an alluring and successful manner. While representative of only one part of how she envisioned her role in working with retail interiors, Le Maire's considerations appear to align closer with Loewy's philosophies on efficiency—in this

---

<sup>114</sup> Eleanor Le Maire, Designer of Neiman Marcus Preston Center, 12 September 1951, Eleanor Le Maire Associates Records, 1928 – 1970, Box 1, Smithsonian Archives of American Art.

<sup>115</sup> Eleanor Le Maire, Speech, 5 September 1941, Eleanor Le Maire Associates Records, 1928 – 1970, Box 2, Smithsonian Archives of American Art, 1.

<sup>116</sup> Le Maire, Speech, 3.

case, creating a space to sell merchandise—than with Robsjohn-Gibbings’ belief in the triumph of aesthetics.

The second redesign process for Neiman Marcus’s downtown location began almost immediately after the 1941 renovations were completed, when the store’s leaders identified a need for more selling space.<sup>117</sup> Stanley Marcus was heavily involved in the planning of the renovations. Marcus worked closely with Le Maire to ensure the new space upheld the store’s brand identity and Marcus’s personal merchandising beliefs. Marcus’s archives contain correspondence as early as 1950 between the two parties regarding the project; however, the notes suggest the pair had been discussing the changes for many years. Marcus and Le Maire collaborated over letters and meetings during the design period. Their conversations revealed that the most important aspects in the renovated interiors were maintaining the store’s commitment to Neiman Marcus as a specialty brand, presenting a new and modern interior with functional aspects, and using art and design to elevate the store and distinguish it from competitors.<sup>118</sup> Just as Gimbels stressed that the new interiors did not change the values of its store, Stanley Marcus obsessed over the need to maintain his store’s notorious atmosphere while creating a modern and appealing space.

The conversations between the pair reveal the store’s priorities in respect to visual appearance. Keeping an eye on interior trends, Marcus and Le Maire constantly

---

<sup>117</sup> McCauley, *The First Forty Years*; Letter from Stanley Marcus to Eleanor Le Maire, 2 February 1950, Stanley Marcus Collection, (Collection A93.1869), Box 58, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.

<sup>118</sup> Letters between Stanley Marcus and Eleanor Le Maire, 9 March 1951, 6 April 1951, 30 March 1951, Stanley Marcus Collection, (Collection A93.1869), Box 58, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.

chatted about other store interiors. In March 1951, shortly after the opening of the new Sakowitz department store in Houston, Marcus wrote Le Maire about the new store:

Confidentially, (and very confidentially), I have never been in a new store that gave me fewer ideas or less stimulation than this store does. It's big and it's new and it has a good floor plan of a conservative type; however, there isn't a new idea as far as I could see in the entire building. The décor and fixtures were very bad. I do not want to be quoted on this.<sup>119</sup>

Both stores catered to a similar clientele and had a strong luxury trade. The Sakowitz interiors from 1951 represented a departure from their turn-of-the-century interiors. The old store was like the 1914 Neiman Marcus, with wood and marble cases and stocked shelves behind the counters. With coffered ceilings, large chandeliers, and decorated columns, the space appears quite ornate. The 1951 interiors present an entirely different look. The photograph of the shoe department shows an interior stripped of much of the classical ornament prevalent in the former plan. The department appears to present a toned down, "Hollywood Regency" style through Chinese Chippendale chairs, sofas with classical lines, tufted ottomans, and a large tropical mural. It is an ode, of sorts, to Dorothy Draper, famed mid-century interior designer known for her bold and eclectic style. A detail of the display cases illustrates Greek Key decorative details on the case fronts and bamboo framing. The cases behind are closed, with mirrored fronts. Though the photos were taken prior to the opening of the store, only a few small glass cases display merchandise, suggesting the

---

<sup>119</sup> Letter from Stanley Marcus to Eleanor Le Maire, 9 March 1951, Stanley Marcus Collection, (Collection A93.1869), Box 58, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.

store employed a more traditional approach of closed-stock display and relied on sales personnel to help customers, while also engaging in modern trends of paring down merchandise on display.

A photograph of the entrance to the women's department, taken in 1951, shows another view of the Sakowitz store. The department mixes selling space with vast areas of open space. The center of the department has an island of cases that obviously required sales help. Tall, glass cases with saber legs and curved edges separate the customer from the sales person. Behind the bank of cases, rectangular units display merchandise in lighted alcoves, likely to house excess stock in drawers. Specialized departments fan out from this central bank of fixtures in a circular layout. From the center, customers could turn their heads and see all of the departments, but within a department, shoppers could only see the central display. The department behind the central fixtures shows a wall of hanging clothing suggesting the department fused specialized selling and open stock display.

It is difficult to discern exactly why Marcus' detested the Sakowitz interior design beyond what he called "very bad" styling.<sup>120</sup> With his own store's expansion at the time, Marcus remained concerned about creating an unfashionable interior. His commitment to contemporary design is evident in his letters to Le Maire. After a trip touring department stores on the west coast, he wrote to her regarding the spaces: "I find them all very stereotyped and not a great deal of what I would want in any of them. As I come back to the store I find myself reimpressed (sic) with much of the

---

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

design quality of the second floor of our own store.”<sup>121</sup> His references for the 1941 Robsjohn-Gibbings interiors, along with his love for the designs of Paul Frankl and Bill Haines, two designers whose interiors were unique and dramatic, clarifies his aesthetic. He asked Le Maire to approach the store interiors with inspiration from Haines and Frankl “so that we can get a store job that is unlike all of the other store jobs in America. I am not looking for anything radical, as you well know, but I am hopeful of getting a classic, distinguished character to our downtown improvements.”<sup>122</sup> Le Maire responded to Marcus’s thoughts, writing, “I quite agree with you that so much of current design is stereotypes.”<sup>123</sup> She further suggested that most designers did not bother to research and investigate their task, but rather acted by simply “applying and taking forms from here and there.”<sup>124</sup> Perhaps due to Marcus’s commitment to Robsjohn-Gibbings interiors, the renovated store design preserved many aspects of Robsjohn-Gibbings’ approach. Certain aspects of Robsjohn-Gibbings’ space were completely preserved such as the sitting area with the modern painting. The sofa, coffee table, and painting remained the same, while the side chairs disappeared; one was replaced with a clothing rack, suggesting that Le Maire’s design

---

<sup>121</sup> Letter to Eleanor Le Maire from Stanley Marcus, 30 March 1951, Stanley Marcus Collection, (Collection A93.1869), Box 58, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Letter to Stanley Marcus from Eleanor Le Maire 6 April 1951, Stanley Marcus Collection, (Collection A93.1869), Box 58, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

attempted to shift the modern styling of Robsjohn-Gibbings to create a more functional sales space.

The Millinery Department on the second floor shows how Le Maire altered other spaces designed by Robsjohn-Gibbings to enhance presentation of merchandise. A nearly identical viewpoint to the figure, the glass screens remain; however, Le Maire's design adds brass treatments to Robsjohn-Gibbings' clear glass partition. In the original space, Robsjohn-Gibbings defined his design with dramatic architectural elements. Le Maire largely pares down those features to create a relatively flat and uncomplicated surface upon which to display goods. Le Maire uses color to segment the space, choosing delicate pastels that allow merchandise to stand out. Aside from decorative details, the biggest change lay in how customers interacted in the space. In her design, while self-selection is still limited, customers could engage with the merchandise throughout the room via close inspection. Wall niches and shelves display selected hats to visitors. This image helps illustrate how Le Maire's design philosophy differed as she focused on merchandise organization and display.

The correspondence between Le Maire and Marcus illustrates that she actively encouraged Marcus to consider how the interiors supported display. While Stanley Marcus may have focused primarily on style and aesthetics, Le Maire reminded him of the functionality of the store as well. In response to his love of the Robsjohn-Gibbings spaces on the second floor, Le Maire pointed out that these spaces offered salon selling, or departments that showed minimal merchandise and relied on saleswomen to pull items from closed stockrooms for customers. She encouraged placing more merchandise on display.<sup>125</sup> While Marcus's vision of the project, and his comparison

---

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

of the space with other stores, focused heavily on the aesthetics, Le Maire helped push the design to encompass the functional aspects of the space, considering efficiency, storage of stock, patterns of use, and movement through the space. With Le Maire's direction, the updated Neiman Marcus reflected the principles of modern design articulated by Kaufmann, and embraced by the industrial design profession—the store became a harmony of aesthetic appeal, functionality, and commercial prowess.

Le Maire's design for the store incorporated Stanley Marcus's style direction but also helped organize the merchandise and modernize the flow of the space. She recommended that:

The characteristics of the first floor vaulted ceiling be preserved but that this be supplemented with a new lowered acoustical peripheral ceiling, new lighting, a new free flow fixture layout eliminating dead end merchandising corners and permitting easy accessibility to the escalators and also the new centrally located stairway to the enlarged mezzanine.<sup>126</sup>

Le Maire's letter illustrates how she thought critically about department store design and functionality, clearly considering fixture placement and how it directed a flow through the space.

Stanley Marcus, who seems to have been worried and skeptical about the final design, constantly questioned Le Maire and sent her advice. He shared with her a letter from a Neiman Marcus customer who wrote, "The very simplicity of your store and the absence of the usual streamlined effect found in so many of our supposedly fine stores certainly stands out in my memory and I hope you will never be tempted to 'go

---

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 2.

fancy' at Neiman Marcus."<sup>127</sup> Marcus noted of the customer's experience, "I want to reiterate once more the fact that we don't want to lose this quality that makes our store stand out from all of the other stores of the country today."<sup>128</sup>

Le Maire frequently reassured Marcus about the design of the store. She told him once about the design's attempt to balance the new interiors with the existing atmosphere. Describing the store's different departments, she wrote, "All of these will be NEW, and will not have too much resemblance to the OLD Neiman Marcus...the main part of your store, I assure you, will have the Neiman Marcus look we all prize and have no desire to change."<sup>129</sup> Her vision for the store did feel new upon completion. After parts of the project were completed, she reminded Marcus how the store looked when she first started working with Neiman Marcus in the late 1930s:

The Neiman Marcus Dallas Store, interior-wise, I am very happy to say, has a wonderfully warm, vital quality and a most distinguished character. However, my first recollection of your store years ago is of dark Jacobean oak molded fixtures, canopied pediments around the perimeter, stained glass rondel windows, all of which made for a dated interior.<sup>130</sup>

---

<sup>127</sup> Letter from Stanley Marcus to Eleanor Le Maire, 30 April 1951, Stanley Marcus Collection, Box 58, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Letter to Stanley Marcus from Eleanor Le Maire, 2 August 1951, Stanley Marcus Collection, (Collection A93.1869), Box 58, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.

<sup>130</sup> Letter to Stanley Marcus from Eleanor Le Maire 6 April 1951, Stanley Marcus Collection, (Collection A93.1869), Box 58, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.



While Le Maire attempted to embrace certain principles exemplified by industrial design, she remained leery of one key trend that encouraged efficiency in department store modernization—the introduction of self-service. As Loewy pushed self-service as the key to success, especially in his designs for new buildings, in her early designs, Le Maire questioned its appropriateness for a store like Neiman Marcus—a store known for its skilled sales personnel. In an effort to distinguish Neiman Marcus from other department stores and uphold the atmosphere discussed by Marcus and Le Maire, the design for the sales floor resisted many of the self-service fixtures as found in other stores.

Even though Neiman Marcus initially resisted this shift, reports from shoppers and general market trends encouraged the company to consider self-service. In 1953 Stanley Marcus hired secret shoppers to report on their experiences in the store. Many of the complaints from one woman, for example, centered on having to wait for sales help. The woman suggested that Neiman Marcus was understaffed and that sales personnel were poorly educated regarding the qualities of their products. Additionally, she noted that the merchandise was not marked or was marked incorrectly; she emphasized the inconvenience of having to wait for salesgirls to find correct prices.<sup>131</sup> The woman's complaints identified a cultural shift towards a more independent shopper who expected a faster and more efficient way to shop; these shoppers supported the shift towards self-service and open stock on the selling floor. That secret shopper's complaints—and the general opinion of the retail trade—were amplified by

---

<sup>131</sup> Report prepared for Stanley Marcus from "The Shopper," March 1953, Stanley Marcus Collection, (Collection A93.1869), Box 108, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.

a conversation with Tobe Collier-Davis, a fashion magnate who visited the store that same month. Founder of *The Fashion Report by Tobe*, Collier-Davis was an instrumental figure in fashion and retail merchandising in the mid-twentieth century. Upon visiting the downtown Neiman Marcus store, Tobe stressed to Stanley Marcus the importance of outside display and exposed stock.<sup>132</sup>

Le Maire, who was committed to the old way of selling, responded to Tobe's comments in a letter to Marcus stating, "I agree with her fully about the importance of outside display and exposed stock...I would be most hesitant to accept it as the right thing for Neiman Marcus."<sup>133</sup> She continued:

I am frank to say that I would be distressed to see you stray from that pattern in your merchandising unless it should some day prove no longer to be a workable pattern. I believe in exposed stock and display or as I have always preferred to call it, "presentation of merchandise" as being tremendously important. We are not dealing here, however, with a general point of view, but with Neiman Marcus.<sup>134</sup>

Le Maire and Marcus resisted modern merchandising methods because they felt that self-service would alter the image and quality of shopping at Neiman Marcus. In the name of branding, Neiman Marcus's 1953 store renovations sought to improve the older store interiors without completely shifting the store's image. Le Maire's designs did so by engaging in merchandise display while offering limited self-service. A photograph of the first floor men's shop illustrates how Le Maire's design achieved

---

<sup>132</sup> Letter from Eleanor Le Maire to Stanley Marcus, 15 April 1953. Stanley Marcus Collection, (Collection A93.1869), Box 254, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

that feat. Selected merchandise, such as umbrellas, remains accessible, while glass cases protect textile merchandise and open shelves store visible stock. Just as in the millinery department, customers could browse merchandise; in the men's department, however, the image reveals that stock remained visible, though the organization of cases encouraged customers to ask a sales person for help in making a selection. While Raymond Loewy considered self-selection at the very core of function and operations, Le Maire's design for Neiman Marcus in 1953 illustrated a design that offered a compromise between showing merchandise and allowing people to shop unassisted.

A photograph of Coco Chanel's 1957 visit to commemorate the store's fiftieth anniversary and the "French Fortnight" celebration reveals how Neiman Marcus ultimately integrated much more open stock into certain departments. The image depicts Chanel, with Stanley Marcus and other store executives, picking up a men's hat from a display table and examining it, just as any Neiman Marcus customer might. The background of the photo shows a fixture with suits organized by color and stacked two rows high. This image suggests that while Le Maire and Marcus initially resisted the concept of open-stock fixtures and self-selection, the store eventually relented and incorporated the self-service way of selling into select departments. As the decade progressed and Neiman Marcus expanded to suburban locations, Le Maire's designs increasingly integrated the more modern methods of visual merchandising. This shift is discussed in the next chapter. In hindsight, Neiman Marcus's renovated spaces shared many visual similarities with the Sakowitz interiors, suggesting that while Neiman Marcus attempted to distinguish itself from other stores, it simultaneously embraced retail trends.

The introduction of the theory of industrial design to the larger design community and the introduction of those theories to department store design in the 1940s, created new expectations for store design. Instead of focusing purely on aesthetic properties and allowing store managers and buyers to complete the rest, designers experimented with space planning, layouts, lighting, display methods, and atmospheric qualities which changed the way stores functioned and how consumers shopped. The notions of efficiency and functionality that defined the theoretical conversations of modern design informed the ways in which retailers re-imagined scientific selling.

While early modernization projects focused mainly on aesthetics and inspired stores that looked modern, later projects began to consider the larger goals of industrial design. Loewy's work with Gimbels and Foley's marked a turning point in department store design because it exemplified the ways in which the principles of industrial design could be applied to department stores to create beautiful *and* functional spaces. While many interior designers and architects may have been aware of the discourse surrounding industrial design in the 1940s, Loewy's work and the subsequent press coverage exemplified how those ideas could inform retail design. The role of the department store designer shifted to encompass a larger set of priorities, which included creating visually appealing *and* efficient spaces simultaneously. Stores increasingly looked towards designers, rather than managers and buyers, for advice on layout and display.

Le Maire's work with Neiman Marcus highlighted the early stages of this shift. While many of her conversations with Stanley Marcus focused on aesthetics, Le Maire pushed her colleague to consider design issues beyond strictly visual ideas. While the

final project spoke more to the overall atmosphere of the store and disregarded the self-service approach of shopping that many customers and retailers embraced, Le Maire's design incorporated some new ideas regarding store layout, planning, and merchandise display. She attempted to challenge Robsjohn-Gibbings' solely aesthetic vision.

As the mid-century progressed, and stores constructed new locations, designers took their early learning from modernization projects and spearheaded new trends and expectations in retail design. Embracing the authority of the industrial designer's to address both consumption and harmony of function and beauty, visual merchandising motivated retail designers to consider the department store as singular object with an array of working parts. As new branch stores began to pop up outside of cities in the 1950s and 1960s, designers received complete autonomy over department store design projects. They relied on the early ideas of modernization as a foundation upon which to perfect the design of the department store as a beautiful machine for selling. The designers' commitment to create a space that excelled at scientific selling altered the ways in which department stores functioned and mid-twentieth-century consumers shopped within those spaces.

### Chapter 3

#### SEEING CHANGE: “THE PERSONALITY OF A STORE”

Our major interest will not be merely in the obvious factors of the suburban store, but in uncovering the special psychological forces which can be harnessed—where there is a competitive situation, what are the immediately discernible appeals which cause the choice of one suburban store over another.

Ernest Dichter, A Proposal For a Motivational Research Study of Department Store Sales: Advertising and Merchandising, May 1954

During the 1950s, as the renovation trend swept the nation’s department stores, and as suburbanization redefined American shopping habits, department store branch locations created fresh opportunities for designers to showcase modern design. They set a new standard for interior and exterior design that catered to the new type of mid-century consumer while shaping internal store operations. This chapter will consider the trajectory of early branch locations that emerged in the 1930s and follow the new spaces of commerce that emerged in the 1950s. It will illustrate how the visual vocabulary of department stores allowed individual stores to connect with their immediate community and eventually create a larger suburban identity. By the end of the 1950s, as more suburban stores competed for local customers, designers developed a set of standard practices that no longer represented individual communities but rather a more general, national suburban personality—the antithesis to city life.

In 1958, Ernest Dichter (1907-1991), a mid-century marketing expert credited with developing motivational research, created a proposal for the Hecht Company, a

department store chain headquartered in Arlington, Virginia. The report focused on the chain's Washington, D.C. store and summarized the importance of visual appearance, explaining:

A very important circumstance, the personality of a store is a stimulus which raises certain expectations as well as fears. At the very moment of reading about the store, or entering it, the consumers feel they can anticipate the kinds of satisfactions or dissatisfactions they are likely to get or not get in the store of some of its departments, as far as quality, service, price, etc. are concerned.<sup>135</sup>

Dichter highlighted an important concept that developed alongside suburban branch locations—retail “personality.” Dictated by overall store design, the notion of personality governed how customers reacted to or felt about a store solely by looking at it or reading about it. A powerful tool that could trump the actual experience or merchandise for sale, personality allowed customers to anticipate what to expect and decide whether or not to even enter the store.

Branch locations led the field in identifying community culture and designing stores that used “personality” to encourage suburbanites to frequent them. Cultural historian Warren Susman identified a “culture of personality” in the 1920s and 1930s, when Americans began to transition from a focus on personal character, or an individual’s moral integrity, to personality, or an individual’s likability in the eyes of a social audience.<sup>136</sup> Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People*,

---

<sup>135</sup> Ernest Dichter, A Creative Problem Analysis and Proposal for a Motivational Research Study “The Present and Future Role of the Hecht Company in the Washington Department Store Field,” April 1958, 6.

<sup>136</sup> Susman, “Personality,” 216; Westbrook, “Abundant Cultural History,” 481-486.

published in 1936, illustrates the emphasis during this era on obtaining admiration in social circles.<sup>137</sup> In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), sociologist Erving Goffman argued that an individual could construct and control how others viewed him or her, based on interactions. Goffman believed that, in the “presentation of oneself,” a person could ultimately control others’ perceptions: “He may wish them to think highly of him, or to think that he thinks highly of them, or to perceive how in fact he feels toward them, or to obtain no clear-cut impression; he may wish to ensure sufficient harmony so that the interaction can be sustained, or to defraud, get rid of, confuse, mislead, antagonize, or insult them.”<sup>138</sup> The notion of constructing the perception of one’s personality suggested that people, if they sent the right signals, could be whoever they wanted to be.

Emily Post helped identify the material associations of personality, suggesting that individuals had the capacity to construct an outward-facing image of themselves through interior design. Speaking of home interiors, she explained in her 1922 book on etiquette: “The personality of a house is indefinable, but there never lived a lady of great cultivation and charm whose home, whether a palace, a farm-cottage or a tiny apartment, did not reflect the charm of its owner.”<sup>139</sup> The notion that personality could be defined by material surroundings became the basis for her 1930 book *The*

---

<sup>137</sup> Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1936).

<sup>138</sup> Irving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Edinburgh: The University of Edinburgh, 1956), 2.

<sup>139</sup> Emily Post, *Etiquette in Society, In Business, In Politics, and at Home* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1922), 132.



*Personality of a House*.<sup>140</sup> Post's writing exemplifies the ideas of Susman and Goffman in her representation of the ways in which people could actively construct personality. By 1954, Dichter had posited that just as people could create a personality for themselves using material signals, so too, could stores. The interior design of suburban branch locations in the 1950s illustrates how designers employed the concept of personality to brand stores and encourage patronage.

### **Early Suburban Branch Locations**

In the mid-twentieth century, the department store emerged as a leader in the retail industry for middle class consumers.<sup>141</sup> As America's suburban populations grew, department store executives sought to apply the same ideas of convenience and ease of shopping that they had employed in their renovation projects updating older downtown stores; they thus created new convenient, close-by branches for shoppers living outside the city limits. Early suburban department stores popped up in the 1930s, a trend that pointed toward the many changes embraced by retail design in the 1950s and 1960s. As *Garrison's Magazine* noted in 1941, "One after another the larger department stores and specialty shops of New York City are opening satellite stores in the suburban residential areas."<sup>142</sup> These early stores were seen as *satellite* locations that brought slices of the downtown store to the suburbs. Considered annex

---

<sup>140</sup> Post, *The Personality of a House* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1930).

<sup>141</sup> Harvard University Bureau of Business Research, *The American Department Store: 1920-1960* (Cambridge: Graduate School of Business, Harvard University, 1963), 9.

<sup>142</sup> "Macy's Parkchester," *Garrison's Magazine*, December 1941, 11.

locations, the early suburban stores were smaller than the parent stores and presented a curated selection of merchandise for local shoppers. Downtown locations were still the flagship stores, and consumers frequented them for more important shopping trips and better selection.

In 1932, *Architectural Record* published a story about suburban branch department stores, the first of many articles the journal would publish on the topic over subsequent decades. The author, Milton Lowenthal, noted that suburban stores “provide for patrons the conveniences which concentration in the city has made difficult to attain. Although many women enjoy shopping in town, there are those who neither have the time to do so, nor care to travel through congested city traffic with attendant parking difficulties.”<sup>143</sup> The suburban store brought the city store to the suburbs in a convenient package. Ideas of convenience are at the core of suburban store design in the mid-twentieth century; as notions of convenience changed, department stores embraced those evolving ideas.

In 1930, Strawbridge and Clothier of Philadelphia opened a branch location in Admore, just ten miles outside of downtown. The four-story building brought Strawbridge and Clothier closer to the residents of the Main Line, the wealthy suburbs that developed outside of Philadelphia in the first half of the twentieth century. As *Architectural Record* noted in an article about the project, “Congested streets and inadequate parking facilities in ‘downtown’ shopping districts have caused many large

---

<sup>143</sup> Milton Lowenthal, “The Suburban Branch Department Store,” *Architectural Record*, July 1932, 3.

department stores to open suburban branches. These have been found successful.”<sup>144</sup>

The two-page article highlighted the store’s façade and floor plan. The stand-alone building had front, rear, and side entrances easily accessible from roadways. A typical styled building for the time period, the blocky stone exterior was geometric with minimal adornment and a slightly streamlined feel. A few Art Deco relief carvings adorned the façade as well. The angular and stylized figures and the overall look of the interior and exterior represented a machine-age aesthetic popular in period artwork and cutting edge department stores, such as Bullocks Wilshire; these features identified the building as a structure of contemporary design.<sup>145</sup>

The interiors of the store reflected a 1930s ideal retail space, quite similar to—although not as exquisite as—the Bullocks Wilshire department store in Los Angeles. With much of the interior architecture pared down in comparison to the flagship location, the Ardmore store suggested a clean and modern approach to retail design. Unlike the open floor plans of spaces such as the Grand Leader, the Ardmore plan segmented departments using cases and dividers. The store’s small size is evident in the drastically reduced number of sales counters on the main floor. From the center of the floor, customers could see into each department, but the perimeter departments

---

<sup>144</sup> “The Strawbridge and Clothier Department Store Branch at Ardmore, PA,” *Architectural Record*, 68 (December 1930): 464.

<sup>145</sup> Erika Doss, “Toward an Iconography of American Labor: Work, Workers, and the Work Ethic in American Art, 1939-1945,” *Design Issues*, 13, no. 1 (1997): 53, suggests the popularity of labor imagery as celebrating work and labor. Many artists responded to the depression by employing iconography representing the worker, often as “heroic figures of action and autonomy, and thus as exemplars of work ethic.” The worker image subsequently emerged as a familiar symbol in popular culture.

created cozy nooks that sheltered shoppers on three sides. When compared to the flagship store in downtown Philadelphia, which opened a new building in 1928, the differences between suburban and urban interior design become evident. While occupying a much larger footprint than the Ardmore location, the Philadelphia store also had a much more open floor plan with a grid-like row of cases, quite similar to the plan of The Grand Leader. In the Philadelphia store, as the image suggests, the escalators occupied a central position and offered ascending and descending rides. Both locations employed similar styled cases; however, the Ardmore location appeared less cluttered with not as much merchandise visible. The comparison suggests that suburban stores, with a curated selection of merchandise, relied less on the showmanship of excess in store display methods than their parent locations.

While much lighter and airier than earlier stores, the new Ardmore Strawbridge and Clothier branch retained a key feature of department store shopping: the inability to serve oneself. With glass cases throughout the store, shoppers were forced to ask salespeople for help selecting and retrieving the majority of merchandise. The floor plan, shown in *Architectural Record*, illustrates how fixtures mapped the selling space. In the photos of the store, it is clear that glass cases held a huge majority of the merchandise within or behind them. For clients, handling merchandise meant looking at it through a glass veil or asking for sales assistance. The petite Ardmore location intended to serve Main Line residents in between their visits to the main store. Providing just enough goods to satisfy customers' urge, to shop at Strawbridge's, the branch brought the brand closer to home. The store looked towards modernization trends to construct the new building, but it lacked a distinct personality that reflected

the character of the community. The attraction did not go very far beyond shoppers' interest in the familiar brand.

The Ardmore Strawbridge and Clothier was an early branch location, and, according to *Architectural Record*, it served as a benchmark example of suburban store design. Lowenthal suggested that suburban stores were poised to gain more popularity; however, development slowed as a result of the Great Depression and World War II. In the postwar era, the suburbanization patterns of the United States revived the development of the branch location. Suburban stores came to symbolize a new era of shopping rather than simply serving as convenient annexes to city stores.

The postwar era consumer society saw dramatic expansion of branch locations. With increased disposable income, heavy encouragement to spend money, convenient shopping locations, and the expansion of consumer credit, the consumers of postwar America were very different from their earlier counterparts.<sup>146</sup> The act of shopping morphed into a great new pastime—families piled into big cars and drove to the mall, where extra-wide parking spaces welcomed them to buy whatever they could or could not afford.

Following World War II, government policy fueled the growth of suburbs across the country. Housing shortages during the war intensified as soldiers returned home, married, and began to start families. Even during the war, housing capacity

---

<sup>146</sup> For discussions on postwar consumer society see Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004); Delores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003); David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Villard Books, 1993); Susan Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market* (New York City: Pantheon, 1989).

levels reached ninety-nine percent, for example, in one industrial area outside of Detroit, even prior to the arrival of two hundred fifty thousand additional workers who relocated to the area seeking wartime employment.<sup>147</sup> Given these trends, 1945 marked the sixteenth year in which the demand for new houses nationwide was not met by new construction.<sup>148</sup> Housing was so limited that families across the country shared houses and apartments; five hundred thousand families crammed into army Quonset huts and temporary housing; people even converted old trolley cars into homes. An immediate need existed for more than five million new houses.<sup>149</sup>

The government answered the postwar housing shortage by creating policies to aid housing development and to make mortgages easier to obtain. As a result, during the 1950s, the number of houses in the United States doubled with the vast majority of new homes built in the suburbs; over two-thirds of these residences were built by large companies as opposed to local contractors.<sup>150</sup> Following the war, the FHA, established during the New Deal under Franklin Roosevelt, approved additional mortgage insurance to allow the lending of billions of dollars for additional mortgages. In 1944, the government passed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, also known as the GI Bill, which created a mortgage program similar to the FHA allocations for returning

---

<sup>147</sup> Andrew Shanken, *194X: Architecture, Planning, and Consumer Culture on the American Homefront* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 107.

<sup>148</sup> Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 131.

<sup>149</sup> Halberstam, *The Fifties*, 134; Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 232.

<sup>150</sup> Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), 876; Hayden, 132.

veterans. This bill ensured housing for sixteen million veterans and loosened government restrictions on builders, which supported new housing developments.<sup>151</sup> The Housing Act of 1949 further encouraged builders to construct prefabricated homes in the suburbs by earmarking more money for FHA mortgages; it also supported public housing projects in cities.<sup>152</sup> From 1944 to 1950, the number of single-family housing starts increased from one hundred-fourteen thousand to 1.7 million.<sup>153</sup> Due to the changes in the FHA and the passage of the new GI Bill, banks supplied loans for ten million new homes from 1946 to 1953.<sup>154</sup>

With Americans able to purchase homes with government insurance of mortgages, developers built new residences at astounding rates. Seeking out large plots of land that could be subdivided for maximum occupancy (and profit), developers often chose to build on formerly rural areas outside of cities. Often developers created a sense of community by building swimming pools or by donating land for churches within the housing communities.<sup>155</sup> Unlike the early suburbs of the late-nineteenth and early- twentieth century, the popularity of the automobile allowed families to move into new subdivisions that lacked access to public transportation. Suburban developments filled in areas without access to public transportation,

---

<sup>151</sup> Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 233.

<sup>152</sup> Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 33.

<sup>153</sup> Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 233.

<sup>154</sup> Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 132.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

spreading far beyond the end of transportation lines.<sup>156</sup> While creating access to homes to huge numbers of people, suburbanization also segregated the American public in new ways. Many developments only allowed whites to purchase homes. Even when black families were allowed to purchase homes, the GI Bill only extended mortgage support to white servicemen, creating highly segregated suburban communities of whites only.<sup>157</sup>

Suburbanization altered how and where Americans shopped. To better serve middle-class consumers, department stores moved outside of cities to provide greater convenience, following the patterns of American home life.<sup>158</sup> In a study of forty-five business districts conducted by The Census Bureau, total retail sales rose 32.2 percent from 1948 to 1954, but sales in central business districts rose only 1.6 percent.<sup>159</sup> As suburbs grew rapidly in the mid-twentieth century, department stores catered to the new communities; executives quickly realized the potential in shifting the focus away from downtown locations and toward large, flagship establishments within suburban

---

<sup>156</sup> Cohen, *Consumer's Republic*, 198.

<sup>157</sup> For an in depth discussion on the politics of race in suburban America, see Cohen, *Consumer's Republic*, 194-256.

<sup>158</sup> While suburban branch locations were a new trend in the 1950s and 1960s, Sears, Roebuck & Company had experimented with full-service stores outside of city limits in the late 1920s. The stores were connected to catalog distribution centers and believed to be convenient for similar reasons as mid-century branch locations: easy to drive and park. For a greater discussion on Sears and the earlier suburban development see Longstreth, "Sears, Roebuck," 238, 245-6.

<sup>159</sup> "Greater Profitability of Suburban Branches," *Tax Policy*, August 1957, 6.



shopping centers or covered malls.<sup>160</sup> Cities leaders fought to keep downtown areas populated, encouraging suburbanites to visit the city to work and shop. In the 1940s, decades prior to the peak of suburbanization, cities had begun to react to downtown decline. In 1945, leaders in St. Paul, Minnesota approached the issue aggressively by hiring Loewy to “halt [the]shoppers’ strike.”<sup>161</sup> The city’s problem, described as the “menace of de-centralization of its downtown retail and commercial districts,”<sup>162</sup> was one that would plague many urban areas. The Mayor of St. Paul hired Loewy to study the needs of the city and draft a long-range plan to “cure the ills which [were] besetting downtown business.”<sup>163</sup> The study concluded that convenience was the number one factor in making places relevant to shoppers. Loewy identified the most important factor of convenience: “Centrally located, low-price parking facilities are the central business district’s first great need.”<sup>164</sup> For suburban shoppers, automobile accessibility was the hinge pin of convenience. In order for cities to compete with suburban areas, their stores had to be as easy to get to as suburban centers. The nature of established downtowns hindered responses to this need, while suburban shopping centers specifically catered to it, bolstering the strength of suburban department stores as the mid-century progressed. By the mid-1950s, consumers found few reasons to

---

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Larry Fitzmaurice, “St. Paul to ‘Redesign’ Downtown Area to Halt Shopper’s Strike,” *Sales Management*, January 1945.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

drive downtown to shop, as prominent department stores operated more convenient branch locations in suburbia.<sup>165</sup>

The postwar branch stores catered to the new community of suburban shoppers. Retailers tailored branch locations specifically to personify their local communities rather than simply offering an extension of city merchandise. At first, store personality reflected the local cohort of shoppers within a branch location's community. However, by the 1960s, the notion of personality seemed to define a larger (sometimes national) cohort of shoppers that aligned with a specific store—this defined the branding of that store. The personality of department stores came to represent how clientele wished to define themselves within a larger consumer culture. As branch locations opened further and further away from their flagship stores, retailers relied on a distinct store personality to define their store from competitors.

The initial explosion and sustained success of branch locations took place in the early 1950s. In 1951, Harold J. Nutting, vice-president of Marshall Fields, noted that the store's small branch locations couldn't keep up with suburban shoppers' demand; branches were selling more than twice the original planned three million dollars a year. He told *Fortune*, "Unfortunately we were not farsighted enough at the time."<sup>166</sup> Nutting's comments accentuate the unexpected success of early postwar branch locations. As these locations emerged, the retail and design community teamed up to find the most successful solutions to encouraging suburban shopping. The

---

<sup>165</sup> Whitaker, 26.

<sup>166</sup> Harold J. Nutting quoted in Dero A. Saunders, "Department Stores: Race for the Suburbs," *Fortune*, December 1951, 101.

trajectory can be broken into three clear movements: the pioneer postwar department stores of the late 1940s and early 1950s; the mid-1950s to early-1960s large, stand alone community stores; and shopping mall anchor locations that blossomed in the mid-1960s, which will be discussed in Chapter Five.

The development of branch locations created a heated discourse among retailers and economists. Some argued that branch locations were just a fad, while others insisted that suburban shopping was the way of the future. In a 1954 commentary on department store development, Hrant Pasdermadjian, a British writer on technology, considered the role of branch locations: “These small department stores are now well-known, for example, in the regions of New York, Boston, Cleveland, Chicago, Los Angeles. They are remarkable for their pleasant appearance, well-arranged layout, modern fixtures, convenient interior display.”<sup>167</sup> Pasdermadjian focused on the stores’ link to their local markets and ability to create a pleasant selling space.

The same year, marketing expert Dichter proposed a study for the Associated Merchandising Corporation in New York City to analyze the motivational factors behind department store sales. He singled out the “personality of the shopping area” as one of the most important features of a department store and specifically addressed branch locations. Of utmost importance was the need to make shoppers feel that the shopping area reflected their own ideals, which Dichter believed would differ from region to their region. He noted:

---

<sup>167</sup> H. Pasdermadjian, *The Department Store: Its Origins, Evolution and Economics* (London: Newman Books, 1954), 148.

Especially because of the great changes in most American cities and suburban areas since the war, it is important for the department store to have detailed knowledge of the personality of the area in which it is selling. Not only does it enable the department store to understand whether or not they reflect, complement or supplement the personality of the community, but it will also provide special leads for buyers and management in finding new kinds of goods which the study may indicate will find a receptive public...<sup>168</sup>

While many factors contributed to a store's personality—merchandising, display, advertising, and overall branding – its physical presence played a critical role. As Dichter explained, “Because the customer sees herself as a certain kind of customer, she also sees a certain kind of store as ‘her’ store, for this is the store that understands her needs—the atmosphere in which she likes to shop, the goods she wants to buy, the kind of service she wants, etc.”<sup>169</sup> For new suburban department stores, this meant creating a personality that would attract local consumers, tend to their needs, and make the store “theirs.” Retailers capitalized on personality, as a way to align with a larger, defined group of customers using familiar material and cultural associations. As Dichter noted, the personality of a store only mattered when shoppers felt that it reflected their own persona and consequently chose to shop at that specific establishment. Designers realized that consumers might choose to shop in one store over another based on the notion of personality and even attempted to create distinct personalities within stores.

### **“Informality” at Neiman Marcus, Preston Center**

Neiman Marcus's first branch location represents the store's expansion and delicate attempt to define the “personality” of the new location. In 1951 Neiman

---

<sup>168</sup> Dichter, Proposal For a Motivational Research Study, 8.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 9.

Marcus opened Preston Center, located in a new outdoor shopping development in the city sprawl seven miles from the downtown Dallas flagship store. A small store measuring just sixty-three thousand square feet, the company's first branch location looked strikingly different from the main store. Le Maire, by that time Neiman Marcus's most important designer, crafted the visual appearance of the Preston Center store. Her firm described the project in press releases: "The spacious feeling, the uncluttered look, the importance of 'line and scale' and the avoidance of a striving for effect, an overall simplicity and directness, colors that give a lift to the spirit...these are the basic points of Miss Le Maire's design."<sup>170</sup> Using space planning, color, and lighting, Le Maire created an atmosphere that was both casual and luxurious and seemed directly tailored to the Dallas suburbanite.

Christening it a "Station Wagon Store," *Architectural Forum* also noted that the new Neiman Marcus achieved "casual sophistication using color, space, light, and personalized selling."<sup>171</sup> The unidentified author further asked, "How do you make a suburban store so informal that women will run in and out to shop there as casually as in the neighborhood supermarket? How at the same time do you make it so suggestive of luxury that it will put every shopper in the mood to spend more money than she planned to spend?"<sup>172</sup> The first hurdle, making the store feel accessible for daily visits by local shoppers, speaks to the development of a distinctively suburban retail atmosphere. Of suburban branch locations, *Architectural Record* stressed, "Informality

---

<sup>170</sup> "Eleanor Le Maire, Designer of Neiman Marcus Preston Center," Eleanor Le Maire Associates, September 12, 1951, Eleanor Le Maire Associates Records, 1928 – 1970, Box 1, Smithsonian Archives of American Art.

<sup>171</sup> "Station Wagon Store," *Architectural Forum* 96 (January 1952): 137.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

is the keynote of suburban store design with a conscious attempt to express the difference between building for the casual living habits of the car-driving suburbanite and building for the city store...<sup>173</sup> Neiman Marcus's Preston Center store attempted to solve this dichotomy through the layout, fixtures, display, and employees who were members of the community.

In Preston Center, Le Maire and Marcus used space planning, less ornate materials, a selection of lower-priced merchandise, and an awareness of suburban culture to introduce a casual feeling into the luxury store. Preston Center was just a fraction of the size of the downtown location. To maximize the only available land in the new shopping center, Neiman Marcus employed a somewhat awkward footprint that resulted in an elongated and narrow floor plan. Aside from the toy department in the basement and restaurant and beauty parlor on the second floor, shoppers spent the majority of their time on the main floor. Shoppers could see almost the entire floor from any point, creating a feeling of accessibility and comfort. This was a stark contrast from downtown retail locations that displayed exorbitant amounts of merchandise across multiple floors the size of a city block.

To keep the small space from feeling overcrowded, the store limited the number of departments. The store specifically catered to housewives, offering ladies' fashions and accessories, as well as children's and teens' clothing, and gifts. Additionally, the store devoted as much space to seating areas and aisles as it did to merchandise, as illustrated by a photograph of the teen and children's department. The department shows ample seating, two low chairs and four stools, as well as a large

---

<sup>173</sup> "Suburban Branch Department Stores," *Architectural Record*, May 1954, 194.

open area that allowed customers to easily wander, browse, and relax within the space. Additional seating areas and ease of movement helped create an openness and casual atmosphere distinct to the branch location.<sup>174</sup> To manage stock and keep the downtown store bustling, Marcus capped merchandise prices, reserving expensive and formal stock for the flagship store.<sup>175</sup>

Le Maire's visual styling also supported the more casual feeling characterizing Preston Center. The building acknowledged its place in the suburbs and capitalized on open space, greenery, and car culture. While parking was just steps away from each of the four entrances, making a visit almost effortless, she wished to capture the very essence of suburban life beyond a parking lot. A photograph an exterior entrance shows a wall of windows that allowed natural light to pour into the main floor, a very different feel from the completely artificial lighting of the main store. On the interior, the wall of windows also amplifies the open feel of the space while connecting it to suburbia's park-like setting. The curtain wall of glass, popular in modern corporate architecture, frequently conjured images of large skyscrapers. However, in this setting, Le Maire transformed the curtain wall of glass as a way that connected Neiman Marcus to the relaxed suburban surroundings. She enhanced the greenery of the suburban landscape by adding plants throughout the store's interior. The interior

---

<sup>174</sup> "Station Wagon Store," 138. While less space was devoted to merchandise, Preston Center devoted more space per dollar of sale than the downtown location, essentially making up for the smaller footprint. The branch devoted \$150 per square foot as compared to the flagship that ranged \$32 to \$78 of merchandise per square foot.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

plants and the transparency of the glass position the store as an extension of the suburban landscape.

Materials and a palate of color also enhanced the more relaxed feel of the store. The red brick floor covering the exterior patio extended into portions of the main selling floor, including the teenage and children's department and the accessories department. Le Maire's color scheme and decoration appeared "rustic," incorporating "earth colors" and an "Indian theme."<sup>176</sup> Ethnic decorations included a painted animal skin and a woven carpet in the teen department, as well as a glass-and-plaster mural by the Urbain Native Americans (seen in 3.9).<sup>177</sup> The decorations, vastly different from the formal and sophisticated feel of the downtown store, clearly indicated a strategic commitment to the cultivation of a "personality" that fit new location outside the city and the changing identity of the surrounding community.

Shoppers at the Preston Center store appeared to recognize the new atmosphere as more welcoming and casual. One report from a secret shopper, a woman compensated to take notes on her shopping experience unbeknownst to the employees

---

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>177</sup> In an attempt to identify the Urbain tribe and understand the significance, I have found no record of such a tribe. Perhaps "Urbain" was a local colloquialism or perhaps it was the designer's attempt to connect with a larger modernist movement by engaging with Native culture. Even with the discrepancies of identifying the Urbain people, the incorporation of craft with modernism is not an isolated concept. Contemporary designers including Charles and Ray Eames, Alexander Girard, and Russel Wright found great influence from craft and folk art in their work, as discussed by Pat Kirkham in "Humanizing Modernism: The Crafts, 'Functioning Decoration' and the Eameses," *Journal of Design History* 11, no. 1 (1998): 15-29; Monica Obinski, "Alexander Girard and Herman Miller's Textile and Objects Shop, 1961-1967," *Journal of Design History* 28, no. 3: 254-274.



helping her, identified some differences between the new branch location and the downtown store:

In general the merchandise at the Preston Center Store does not appear to have had the advantages from the display department accorded to the downtown store's windows and inner displays, but the merchandise is much better marked. The difference in the attitude of the salespeople toward the customer is startling. In the Preston Center Store a customer in slacks was getting just as good service as a beautifully suited and groomed person. Good humor and interest on the part of the employees was a pleasant change. Nowhere was there evidence of a condescending attitude. There seems to be a more perfect ratio at Preston Center between customer and salespeople thus eliminating the hurried selling and divided attention.<sup>178</sup>

The shopper's observations accentuated the different atmosphere of the suburban Neiman Marcus. Initially merchandising and display failed to compete with the downtown flagship store; however, the experience itself appeared more suited to suburban life. While the store became more casual in appearance and feel, so too did the attitude of the employees; they seemed either to be part of the local community or possess a keen ability to identify with local shoppers. Suburban Neiman Marcus encouraged browsing with well-marked merchandise and salespersons who let shoppers to "look around all that [they] wanted."<sup>179</sup> The layout and fixtures of the store may have encouraged this atmosphere as well, offering more open fixtures and displayed stock.

---

<sup>178</sup> "Shopping Report, Preston Center Store," 7 April 1953, Stanley Marcus Collection, (Collection A93.1869), Box 108, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

In opening new branch locations, many department store executives feared that the new location would take business from downtown flagship stores. As *Architectural Forum* noted, the Preston Center location offered a curated selection of merchandise to its local shoppers and set a price cap on merchandise sold in the suburban branch to avoid “drawing trade from the parent store.”<sup>180</sup> Fear of creating competition within their own brands was shared nationally as branch locations threatened to siphon sales from main stores. Department store expert and British scholar Pasdermajian addressed this issue:

This establishment of suburban branches has, of course, the disadvantage of strengthening the power of attraction of the suburban shopping districts. By establishing a branch in such a suburban shopping district a metropolitan department store lends to it its prestige and contributes thus to the building up of a competitive center of retailing. It has been said that department stores cut their own throats by the establishment of suburban branches which strengthen these outlying shopping sections.<sup>181</sup>

However, as America’s suburbs exploded, these concerns subsided, and retailers realized that deeper pockets and more selling potential lay in the suburban stores.

In trying to balance the roles of downtown and suburban locations, retail executives faced the thorny problem of choosing what to sell where. *Architectural Record* recommended that branch stores carry a “representative selection of all merchandise handled by the main store. It should have enough stock—which means storage and space.”<sup>182</sup> In addition to providing an ample selection of merchandise, the report noted, stores also needed to maintain a variety of departments: “If some major

---

<sup>180</sup> “Station Wagon Store,” 139.

<sup>181</sup> Pasdermajian, *The Department Store*, 148.

<sup>182</sup> “Suburban Branch Department Stores,” 182.

categories of merchandise are not carried the prestige of the main store may be lost on the branch, or the branch may lose its identity as a department store and become vulnerable to vigorous competition from neighboring specialty shops.”<sup>183</sup> To be classified as a department store and remain competitive with both downtown locations and local specialty shops, the article recommended stores have at least the following twelve departments: women’s wear, accessories, men’s wear, children’s wear, dry goods, small wares, housewares, home furnishings, furniture, and miscellaneous services for shoppers, including a beauty salon and restaurant.<sup>184</sup> Suburban stores attempted to carry as many of these departments as possible; however, some were restricted by space. Finding a balance between selection and available space was a learning curve for new branch stores—especially in the case of smaller, earlier locations such as Presto Center. In her report on the store, the secret shopper remarked a number of times about the quantity of merchandise. In the gift department she noted a good selection and appropriate organization: “There was a quantity of merchandise on display, but it was not cluttered.”<sup>185</sup> Calling the stationary department “the weak spot in the whole store,” the shopper expressed disappointment in finding “only two boxes of stationary on display.”<sup>186</sup> The Preston Center store worked hard to cater to its community and to reflect the personality of its shoppers. While certain aspects of the experience may have fallen short of shoppers’ expectations, as branch locations

---

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> “Shopping Report, Preston Center Store,” 1.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 2.

developed, store executives realized how to cater to and captivate their suburban community by developing the idea of a store “personality.”

### **Raymond Loewy Associates’ “Community” Building**

While suburban branch locations began as smaller versions of a larger, urban brand, such as Neiman Marcus Preston Center, as time passed, suburban stores outgrew and out-performed downtown locations. Simultaneously, the ways in which personality defined branch locations also evolved. The work of Raymond Loewy Associates illustrates how notions of personality shifted away from markers of a particular community patronizing one store to a larger cultural idea of a suburban shopping culture. The firm built stores for small and large chains, often introducing brands to suburbia. The firm’s work with larger, middle-class retailers across the country illustrates how a more general suburban department store personality emerged on a national level.

While Snaith and the firm’s team clearly played a large role in the design and implementation of department store planning, press and media still referred almost entirely to Loewy as the key designer. The essential features of Raymond Loewy Associates strategy for mid-century department stores included a detailed plan that considered function and efficiency paired with an open and accessible interior. Most important, the stores they designed articulated the firm’s vision of customer convenience and community along with the development of new techniques to encourage selling. One of these techniques appeared to be creating a distinctive store personality to draw shoppers to the store. In a speech for sales promotion managers given during the early era of suburban development, Snaith’s assistant Raiser discussed the firm’s process for designing suburban department stores, noting that

“Many stores today are considering expansion in terms of out of town stores before putting further capitalization in their downtown areas.”<sup>187</sup> He was describing the studies and reports produced by the firm, including population studies, as well as analyses of community purchasing power, charge accounts, and parking. While facilities design remained a key feature of the planning process, one of the most important aspects of “successful retailing” was that “shopping must be fun.”<sup>188</sup> Raiser’s thoughts aligned with the discussion surrounding Neiman Marcus’s Preston Center store because he stressed the importance of atmosphere and reduced formality. He observed, “The whole trend of our living is toward the casual and informal and the store as a social force in its community should mirror its time.”<sup>189</sup> Raiser’s thoughts on stores as “fun” and mirrors of community speak to the notion of personality; the store had to provide an atmosphere that felt appropriate to members of the community—a space they could claim as their own.

Raiser specifically referenced the firm’s recently opened Beverly Robinson store, completed in 1952, as serving “a middle class customer with the goods she wants and additional services she cannot find downtown, such as parking, a leisurely pace, and casual atmosphere.”<sup>190</sup> Raiser’s comment points to the suburban store’s vested interest in connecting with its host community, a very important factor in determining the store’s success. Many designers and reporters used the term “casual”

---

<sup>187</sup> Raiser, speech, 3.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 4.

to describe suburban stores. This term aligns with the idealized personality of the suburbs. In 1959, Snaith summed up Raiser's thoughts more concisely, describing the difference between the branch store and the downtown location: "Branch store customers usually fall into a single broad group; by income, age, cultural or regional background, taste, type of home. But downtown is all things to all people. Its customer is potentially any shopper..."<sup>191</sup> Snaith pointed out that branch locations catered to a less diverse customer base; they could create a different kind of store and stock it with merchandise appropriate for a specific demographic. In short, the branch store enjoyed the luxury of focusing on a homogenous group of shoppers.

In 1954, Bloomingdale's of New York City opened a new location in Stamford, Connecticut. On a cold February day, a crowd of people waited outside to be first to enter the new store. As the *Stamford Advocate* noted, the first visitors "were obviously more interested in seeing all parts of the store before settling down to buying."<sup>192</sup> Designed by Raymond Loewy Associates, the new space presented shoppers with novel ideas of what to expect in a department store. The Bloomingdale's store in Stamford existed as a sort of hybrid of downtown and suburban locations. Situated in the downtown, the store was not quite considered fully suburban, or fully urban. It was described as a "downtown store with the extra asset of parking space (enough for 1,000 cars) that can ordinarily be found only in the

---

<sup>191</sup> Snaith, "Design to Strengthen the Downtown 'Image,'" *Stores*, October 1959, 25.

<sup>192</sup> "Ready for First Shopping Tour of New Department Store," *Stamford (CT) Advocate*, 17 February 1954, Raymond Loewy Archive (RLA), Accession 2251, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 3, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

suburbs.”<sup>193</sup> Owned by Federated Stores, who, at that point, were still confident that downtown stores would prevail again, Bloomingdale’s Stamford moved into an already established shopping area within the community. The board chairman noted the company’s reluctance to build in the Stamford suburbs: “Bloomingdale’s is a retail not a real estate operation.”<sup>194</sup> However, with a parking lot that had a larger footprint than the one hundred forty thousand square-foot store, the location invited suburbanites to drive over and shop – in a city store.

While ample parking proved convenient for shoppers, it also ensured shoppers would come and spend. In its 1954 study of suburban branch stores, *Architectural Record* had estimated the value of each parking spot to be \$7,200 of annual sales. The article arrived at that number using the following formula: average unit sale times customers per car times minimum car turnover times selling days per year, or \$4.00 times 1 ½ times 4 times 300 days. They admitted that the figures could vary radically, but even so, it was clear that parking spaces equaled profits for suburban stores.<sup>195</sup>

Branch locations catered to the community within what were known as “trading areas” – the zone circumscribing a four to eight mile radius from the store.<sup>196</sup> In an article highlighting the new Bloomingdale’s store, *Architectural Record* noted

---

<sup>193</sup> “Bloomingdale’s Fourth Store,” *Stores*, May 1954, Raymond Loewy Archive (RLA), Accession 2251, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 3, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

<sup>194</sup> “What Happens When a Big Store Invades a Small Town?,” *Journal of Marketing*, 27 February 1954.

<sup>195</sup> “Suburban Branch Department Stores,” 182.

<sup>196</sup> “The May Report,” Raymond Loewy Associates, c. 1960, Raymond Lowey Papers, MSS 64124, Box 173, Library of Congress, 11-13.

the importance of adapting to a specific community of “pseudo-Colonial houses and ‘country living.’”<sup>197</sup> The article described the problem confronting the firm: “Designing a modern department store for such an environment presented a challenge; for a stark, blank-wall and glass box was considered inappropriate—an essay in Colonial eclecticism insincere.”<sup>198</sup> Essentially, the article questioned how Bloomingdales could fit into the community—how it could take on the personality of its surroundings and shoppers. While *Architectural Record* applauded the store for creating a solution tailored to the Stamford community, the building exterior and interior design appear to be part of a more formulaic approach to suburban retail design. The continuities in style between regional locations suggest that even as early as 1955, a national suburban personality began to form. The *Journal of Marketing* further described the firm’s solution, attributing it to Loewy himself:

The two-story Raymond Loewy design combines the space and dignity of the most modern center with the security of being in an established downtown marketing area. In layout, the store is hand tailored to the family shopping habits of the suburban middle and upper income brackets... The store’s major departments will carry primarily exclusive-franchise lines of men’s, women’s and children’s clothing, accessories and home furnishings (it will skip heavier appliances and furniture).<sup>199</sup>

With a large parking lot, a convenient location within an established shopping area, and a selection of goods adapted for its market, the Stamford Bloomingdale’s became

---

<sup>197</sup> “Bloomingdale’s New Stamford Branch,” *Architectural Record*, May 1955, Raymond Loewy Archive (RLA), Accession 2251, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 3, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>199</sup> “What Happens?”



a popular community center. While the store catered to the needs of local shoppers, it was more likely answering to the larger, national movement which aimed to satisfy “the family shopping habits of the suburban middle and upper income brackets.”<sup>200</sup>

In addition to developing the store for the surrounding community, Bloomingdale’s relied on an aesthetic and atmosphere that reflected the most modern retail practices. Materials and light helped define the store’s modern look. Notable features of the new Bloomingdale’s interior design included the absence of interior walls and the use of color and light to divide space. An image of the sportswear and separates department shows how different treatments of the floors separated departments and guided shoppers through the space. While not clearly revealed in the black and white image, the departments also had colors to distinguish them from one another. From the entrance doors (one of three on the first floor), a customer could see the various departments and use the aisle as a guide to walk through the first floor. Noting the store’s modern features, *Architectural Record* listed some key aspects including “[m]aterials, finishes, equipment: aluminum store fronts and entrance doors; terrazzo floored vestibules; sales floor of rubber tile or carpeting; ceilings of painted plaster or acoustic tile; interior spaces sprinklered and air conditioned; lighting is by a combination of incandescent and fluorescent fixtures.”<sup>201</sup> Shiny new fixtures and accents within the interior and exterior of the building became a way to flaunt the building’s modern character. The press descriptions of this new store all seemed to echo each other. Bloomingdale’s Stamford illustrated a new standard, which became

---

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> “Bloomingdale’s New Stamford Branch.”

the expected one for suburban stores. The store exemplified what would become Raymond Loewy Associates signature look, an aesthetic that broke away from its initial community- oriented roots and that almost immediately created a formula that appealed to companies building suburban branch locations across the country.

In 1959 Bloomingdale's opened another branch location in Hackensack, New Jersey. Designed by Raymond Loewy Associates, the store illustrates the firm's dedication to situating buildings within communities and creating a modern and efficient atmosphere. It demonstrates the creation of standard practices for suburban stores. The exterior, a low and wide building of light colored stone or concrete and with few windows, connected to a large parking lot, much like the Stamford store. Landscaped grounds allowed the urban brand to fit into suburbia. The interiors gleamed, sparkling with bright colors and highly reflective materials. Floors were light in color with a heavy wax that reflected the florescent lights above. The ceiling was flat, also white and smooth except for the sprinklers, lights, and unassuming vents. A glass starburst chandelier paid homage to the contemporary designs of the atomic era. An expansive view of the floor reveals unassuming structural columns. Unlike early department stores that were defined by the abundance of decorative columns, in these stores, developments in structural engineering allowed fewer columns, which were finished to blend into the interior. The architectural structure lacked the ornate decoration that was popular in earlier suburban stores, including Strawbridge and Clothier. Decorative elements included lighting, color, and the subtle plays of light and form. The ceiling echoed the organic curves sculpting the display cases. As a whole, the interior architecture became a blank canvas of sorts upon which to display goods for sale.

The Hackensack project made it clear that the main goal of the modern department store interior was to spotlight merchandise. Looking across the image of the first floor, the mannequins dressed at the back left, and the speckles of hats in the millinery department stand out among the sea of neutral or pastel colors. A different viewpoint of the first floor shows a clothing display in the fine jewelry department. Two mannequins dressed in evening wear stand on a stage-like platform in front of a solid colored wall. The interior design allows the merchandise on display to become the customer's focal point. A photograph of the china department further exemplifies how the interior was intended as a stage set to spotlight goods. In this department, shelves and floor fixtures existed as tools to efficiently and effortlessly display goods to consumers. With no glass to impede their view, the china department would have allowed consumers to not only see, but to also handle goods as they wished. Cases hover above the ground, crafted of a white or light wood body with chrome and glass shelves that show the wide selection of china offered. Ample lighting above both illuminates the consumer's path through the department and highlights the merchandise on display. Wall units glow with additional lighting within the shelves.

While popular media suggested Loewy's own design genius informed the new notion of display that used merchandise as a focal point within the stores, the trend likely connects to contemporary movements in art display. Kristina Wilson, who discussed art display in the 1920s and 1930s, argued that the new modes of display used by Stieglitz made modern art more accessible to viewers. The idea of accessibility translates well in considering department store design. As department stores slowly mirrored trends in art display, they became more engaging, and merchandise felt more attainable. Physically, the location of suburban department

stores created greater access for middle-class, suburban families, and the design of the stores encouraged shoppers to look, touch, and formulate their own opinions on what to purchase. The act of shopping transitioned from a guided tour of merchandise led by a salesperson to a largely self-guided journey of consumption.

As the decade progressed, Raymond Loewy Associates designed stores in cities and suburban areas across the nation. The firm tailored each design to a specific client in a specific community, which accounted for slight differences in the look of the interior spaces. However, no matter the city, style, or target consumer, the spaces designed by Loewy boasted a number of major shared features that created a new standard for modern retail design. Store advertisements and press throughout the country bragged about their store's Loewy interiors, which were equipped with state of the art lighting, efficient and convenient displays, and bright and airy spaces.

The opening of two Filene's stores outside of Boston demonstrates how the core Loewy design standards could be varied to meet local tastes. In 1958, Raymond Loewy Associates designed the largest store to date for the William Filene's Sons Company in Peabody, Massachusetts. It was the first store to open in the Northshore Shopping Center. With "enough carpet to cover Fenway Park,"<sup>202</sup> the store was described as the company's largest branch at one hundred-twelve thousand square feet, situated within "New England's biggest shopping center."<sup>203</sup> Media publications

---

<sup>202</sup> "Filene's First at Northshore," *Boston Globe*, 11 September 1958. Raymond Loewy Archive (RLA), Accession 2251, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 6, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

<sup>203</sup> "Largest Filene Branch Is Set to Bow Monday," *Women's Wear Daily*, 17 September, 1957, Raymond Loewy Archive (RLA), Accession 2251, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 6, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

all seemed to pull from the same press release, consistently noting the one-hundred-and-fifteen specialty departments, sixty different pastel colors used in the interiors, and the store's "contemporary" feel.<sup>204</sup> A photograph of the women's dress department reveals the store's resemblance to both of Loewy's designs for Bloomingdale's. All of these stores had similar architecture: a wide field of vision across the entire sales floor, square columns, and built-in florescent lighting. Both companies also appeared to use interior display similarly as well: organized spaces, mannequins standing alone or on display platforms, with spotlights highlighting each.

In 1961, Raymond Loewy Associates worked on another project with the company: Filene's Southshore, a branch built in the Boston suburb of Braintree. While architecturally similar to Filene's Northshore and to Bloomingdale's Stamford and Hackensack, this new store was slightly more decorated and reflected a more traditional "New England" aesthetic. The men's department, for example, had a sign made up of gold lettering atop a faux brick background. The store incorporated more decorative accents that spoke to earlier ideas of display, such as flowers in canary cages in the undergarments department. *Display*, a retail trade publication, described

---

<sup>204</sup> "What's This Thing Called 'Atmosphere?'," *Institutions Magazine*, May 1959; "Décor, Menu Both New At Filene's Restaurant," *Boston Globe*, 21 October 1959; "Filene's Opens North Shore Store," *Boston Herald*, 25 September 1957; "Immense Throngs Visit New Filene's in Peabody," *Telegram News* (Lynn, MA), 24 September 1957; "Filene's Open North Shore Store Monday," *Winthrop (MA) Transcript*, 19 September 1957; "Largest Filene Branch Is Set to Bow Monday;" "Filene's North Shore Opens With Rocket Launching," *Winchester (MA) Star*, 20 September 1957; "Filene's Opens New Store in North Shore Center Monday," *Lynn (MA) Telegram News*, 22 September 1957; "115 Departments in New Filene's Store," *Boston Herald*, 11 September 1958, Raymond Loewy Archive (RLA), Accession 2251, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 6, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

the new store, writing, “Brightly painted murals reaching from ceiling to floor, wire leaf sculpture, richly colors, glass forms and hand rubbed woods are all used to create an effect of lightness, modernity and color in the new Southshore store opened recently...The style throughout is basically modern, but it ranges from the academic to the abstract...”<sup>205</sup> The store, primarily seen as modern, incorporated special styling that aligned it with its targeted community. While the store was more decorated than Bloomingdales, it shared a commitment to similar principles of retail design and received similar praise in its publicity. Viewers saw the store as modern, and press described it in a similar manner as other Loewy stores: bright, modern, and efficient.<sup>206</sup> It is this overlapping description and shared visual core that helped create a national suburban personality in branch store locations.

The specific demographic of suburban locations allowed them to better serve a single customer base. Essentially, the stores could target a specific and narrow group through both merchandise and styling that reflected how the shoppers in segregated suburbs saw themselves.

---

<sup>205</sup> “Display Gets Good Attention at Filene’s,” *Display*, May 1961, Raymond Loewy Archive (RLA), Accession 2251, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 6, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*; “Lightness, Modernity Created by Décor,” *Boston Herald*, 19 February 1961, Raymond Loewy Archive (RLA), Accession 2251, Publicity Scrapbook Volume 3, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

## **Chapter 4**

### **VISUAL MERCHANDISING AND MODES OF DISPLAY**

This chapter historicizes visual merchandising in department stores and details the rise of the professional display discipline from 1900 – 1955. From the beginning of the century until the early 1920s, two concepts simultaneously influenced interior display within the retail trade. The first, scientific selling, touted by prominent voices of the trade including fixture manufacturers, businessmen, and retail trade journals, progressively engaged a broad conversation regarding the proper usage of fixtures and display. The second notion, characterized by retail environments driven by excess and spectacle, originated with display professionals and window dressers who looked beyond the retail world to other forms for inspiration, such as museums and fairs. This trend leaned heavily on the discourse of retail window display, which began in the 1880s.

Although by the 1920s and 1930s, dedicated interior display professionals appeared in department stores, the first wave was made up of window dressers who shifted their roles to govern retail display on the sales floors as well. The introduction of window dressers within stores ushered in a new wave of retail professionals specifically trained to create and oversee interior display. In the late 1940s, after much experimentation with display in department stores across the country, the term “visual merchandising” emerged, along with a set of professional standards for display based on scientific studies. Professional literature for retailers and training manuals for students began to incorporate guides on visual merchandising, and textbooks trained

professionals on how to “style” merchandise to promote sales. The contemporary discourses regarding display suggest that this marked the beginning of the formation of a general standard of best practice within the retail trade.

A close study of this emerging professional discourse reveals the changes and developments in the theory of merchandise display. While not all professionals followed what were presented as best practices, the literature points to how trade specialists defined cutting edge display techniques. This chapter will explore two major shifts in merchandising and display that occurred in the mid-century: the introduction of designers to the practice of visual display and the development of the concept of “visual merchandising” as a professional practice. While a store’s structural architecture necessarily remained static once a large renovation project was completed, interior display and merchandising offered fluid, ever-changing venues through which to highlight specific goods on a day-to-day basis. Merchandise display became the tool for reinforcing the image of a store as presented by location, merchandise, and interior design. Analyzing the theoretical development of display is crucial to understanding larger interior display changes in department stores of the mid-century. Subsequent chapters will explore the how department store interior design as a whole evolved alongside the development of “visual merchandising.”

### **Display Men, Window Dressers, and the First Merchandisers**

Early twentieth-century display looked very different than later methods, and a variety of individuals informed choices made by store managers. Creating enticing displays had been important to department stores since the turn of the twentieth century; however, the modes of attracting customers, and beliefs about the best ways to display products, changed over time. In the early twentieth century, a discourse of



abundance governed department store display.<sup>207</sup> In 1889, *The Dry Goods Economist*, a leading publication for the retail trade, redefined notions of display and merchandising, telling stores, “Show your goods, even if you show only a small quantity, for the sale of goods will certainly be in proportion to the amount of goods exhibited.”<sup>208</sup> With this idea of showmanship in mind, department stores employed excessive displays to create an exaggerated atmosphere. Displays created spectacles from merchandise with designers draping textiles, building engineering feats with stacks of goods, and using repetition of items – all tactics that suggested the fruits of mass production. Consequently, displays often accentuated the mode of presentation as opposed to the merchandise itself.

At the turn of the century, international expositions, museum exhibitions, and department stores all shared methods of display, dating back at least as far as the Centennial in Philadelphia. Department stores and museums also shared similar architecture—large, classically adorned structures, which created a visual association between the two types of establishments. In “Museums, Merchandising, and Popular Taste,” Harris argues that department stores, world’s fairs, and museums similarly shaped public taste through a wide display of objects with “public knowledgeability.”<sup>209</sup> Identifying these three cultural institutions as spaces in which people saw “objects of the modern world” allows display to emerge as a common

---

<sup>207</sup> Leach, *Land of Desire*, 56-58.

<sup>208</sup> *Dry Goods Economist*, 12 October 1889 quoted in Leach, *Land of Desire*, 56.

<sup>209</sup> Harris, *Cultural Excursions*, 58.

thread.<sup>210</sup> Harris argues that museums, fairs, and department stores shared “centralized principles and merchandising techniques” and aimed to show as many artifacts as possible.<sup>211</sup> All three grouped objects according to functional categories and displayed “selective concentrations” of objects.<sup>212</sup>

Methods of display relied upon a need to showcase as much as possible; displays were cluttered and hectic. A postcard published in 1907 depicting the Jade Room at the Metropolitan Museum of Art illustrates the similarities in display techniques between department stores and museums. The very ornate interior architecture of the Jade Room evokes grand department store interiors. With more than ten tall cases filled with jade objects, the display attempted to offer a conclusive education on jade to the viewer. To our eyes, the number of objects appears overwhelming, a spectacle of excess as opposed to a space of learning. Museum display, much like display at fairs, hoped to present an entire and complete taxonomy of objects.<sup>213</sup> The Metropolitan Museum of Art achieved a similar feeling in The Lace Room. A photograph from 1906 shows a small exhibition of lace that strives to show every style possible, rather than direct a viewer’s focus to specific pieces of lace within the display. As demonstrated in these exhibitions, museum display practices during the early twentieth century continue the taxonomic approach developed in the

---

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 61, 63.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 57-58, 60-61.

nineteenth century. Exhibitions grouped similar objects together and arranged them to reveal recognizable patterns of evolution.<sup>214</sup>

International expositions also reflected a similar culture of display that focused on the spectacle.<sup>215</sup> A photograph of the Santa Clara County Exhibition at The World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 exemplifies the approach. Santa Clara County, famous for prune production, advertised the annual production of twenty million pounds of prunes, more than twice as many as the rest of the United States combined. The exhibit used both abundance and novelty, touting stacks of canned and jarred fruit arranged "in excellent taste" on shelves and in stacks that created a "circular pyramid."<sup>216</sup> The exhibit's main attraction was the "Prune Horse," (centered atop a pedestal in the photograph) a life-sized horse and rider completely covered in dark and light colored prunes. The Fair Commission reported: "no single feature of the California Building attracted more general notice than did this 'Prune Horse.'"<sup>217</sup>

Department store window display shared notions of attracting attention similar to approaches used at museums and fairs. In aligning display techniques with

---

<sup>214</sup> Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995), 56-8.

<sup>215</sup> For more discussions on display at turn-of-the-century World's Fairs see Robert Rydell, *All The World's a Fair* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984).

<sup>216</sup> *Final Report of the California World's Fair Commission: All Exhibits of the State of California*, (Sacramento: State Office, 1894), 31.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*

expositions and exhibitions, department stores may have elevated cultural associations with objects on display. Placing objects for sale in similar formats as popular displays of art and science seen at contemporary museums and fairs was intended to suggest to viewers an increased value of the merchandise. The windows reflected the stores' goals of influencing public taste, and of manipulating, appealing to, and indulging customers.

The earliest discussions of display in department stores began in the 1880s with guides regarding show windows. Created by trained window dressers, large plate glass windows with bold color and lighting produced a theatrical and luxurious space in which to display fashionable merchandise to all passersby outside.<sup>218</sup> The invention of the profession of the window dresser by theater set designers in the 1880s represented the introduction of trained artisans to the craft of store display; it planted the initial seeds of the professionalization of the field.<sup>219</sup> In "'The Art of Draping': Window Displays," Louisa Iarocci, a historian specializing in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century department store display, argues that turn of the century window trimmers used displays of abundance to "distract" those passing by a store. Show windows were a "balance between drawing the viewer's attention to the

---

<sup>218</sup> Leach, *Land of Desire*, 78-79; Leach, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption: Women and Department Stores, 1890-1925," *The Journal of American History* 17, no. 2 (1984): 322-324, 325-326; Susan Porter Benson, "Palace of Consumption and Machine for Selling: The American Department Store, 1880-1940," *Radical History Review*, Fall 1979, 200, 203, 213-214; Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 31; Harris, 56-79, 96-110.

<sup>219</sup> For an in depth discussion on show windows, see Louisa Iarocci, "'The Art of Draping': Window Dressing," in *Visual Merchandising: The Art of Selling* ed. Louisa Iarocci (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013), 137-153; Leach, *Land Of Desire*, 55-70.

impressive range of the store's stock, and attracting and luring them inside for a sale."<sup>220</sup> Iarocci calls this concept the "the 'spectacle' of the unfamiliar and the exotic" she explains that window dressers, such as L. Frank Baum, used goods as "decorative building blocks" to create masterpieces such as the Brooklyn Bridge made of spools of thread.<sup>221</sup> The notion of distraction lay in the ability to create a spectacle that transformed merchandise into something else. Windows were draped with bold fabric, layered with goods, and specially lit with colored bulbs to create a theatrical scene intended to "dramatize" merchandise.<sup>222</sup> A 1910 photograph of a Marshall Field and Company window display illustrates the design concepts of the time. Decorated with crepe paper and draped fabric, the display appears to accentuate stationery, arranging sheets of paper in tree-like structures. The window dresser also fills the base of the window with merchandise. The window display, which attracted a crowd on the street, achieved its goal of creating a spectacle.

The concept of "distraction" in department store display is complex. While Iarocci argues that "distraction" was a positive tactic to call viewer's attention to the store, it is not clear how these display spectacles fostered actual engagement with the merchandise. In *Land of Desire*, Leach, who published the foundational research on display in early department stores, argues that show windows brought consumers and merchandise closer than ever, because, prior to plate glass allowing visual access to

---

<sup>220</sup> Iarocci, "The Art of Draping," 146.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>222</sup> Leach, *Land Of Desire*, 69.

displays, customers walking by rarely saw goods at all.<sup>223</sup> While prospective shoppers could not touch, show windows gave viewers a new perspective – they could now see the options in clothing, accessories, toiletries, toys, or decorative accessories exhibited.

Window dressers were part of the initial group responsible for interior display, and they established fundamental practices in this realm of the retail business at the turn of the twentieth century. Pulling methods and materials from theater set design, the early group of window trimmers aligned department stores with ideas of whimsy and entertainment. Window trimmers responsible for theatrical merchandising techniques began to insert similar concepts of diversion and theatricality inside the store. The work of Jerome Koerber (1871 – 1939) illustrates the bridge created between window and interior display in the early twentieth century. Koerber, Strawbridge and Clothier’s window dresser known as the “father of interior display,” arrived to the United States from Hungary in 1892.<sup>224</sup> He began training as an apprentice at the age of thirteen and spent four years in vocational school learning about the furnishing goods trade. Upon coming to the United States, he worked at a number of department stores, including Hill and Company of New York and G. Fox and Company of Hartford, before accepting a position as chief of the decorating

---

<sup>223</sup> Ibid, 62.

<sup>224</sup> Emily M, Mauger, *Modern Display Techniques* 7th ed. (New York: Fairchild Publications, 1976), 10; 1930 United States Census, s.v. “Jerome A. Koerber,” Philadelphia, Philadelphia Country, Pennsylvania, Roll: 2140, Page: 16B, Enumeration District: 0517, Image: 1022.0, FHL microfilm: 2341874.

department at Stern Brothers in New York City. In 1903, he joined Strawbridge and Clothier to oversee store decoration and window trimming.<sup>225</sup>

In 1923, after many years in the spotlight, Koerber penned *The Art of Draping*, an instructional book on draping, or how to arrange fabric merchandise into a display. Koerber noted that draping could be split into two parts: window dressings and interior display.<sup>226</sup> Window trimming occupied more space in his book, and Koerber's work in general points to window trimming as the foundation of interior display. The book also suggests that Koerber and other window trimmers initially managed interior display, applying the same techniques from windows in interior spaces.

The idea of spectacle, excess, and show continued to dominate department store interior design in the 1910s and 1920s. Even stores in smaller cities and towns subscribed to the popular methods. A promotional postcard of Hinterleiter's Department Store in Allentown, Pennsylvania, circa 1910, illustrates how the window display technique of draping was used in interior display. The interior display and fixtures of the long and narrow store exemplify early twentieth-century department store design. Glass cases and other storage racks behind the counters fill the store. Display tables draped with fabric run down the center aisle. The same draping technique pervades the entire first floor image, with large pieces of fabric, probably dress yardage and house dresses or shirtwaists, draped on top of the glass cases, fixtures, and wall units. Ribbons of fabric decorate the ceiling, and smaller textiles

---

<sup>225</sup> "Prize Winners: The Clothier And Furnisher's Fortieth Anniversary Window Trimming Contest," *The Clothier and Furnisher* 81 (1913): 53.

<sup>226</sup> Jerome Koerber, *The Art of Draping* (Cincinnati: The Display Publishing Company, 1923), 11.

such as handkerchiefs and scarves are tied on fixtures. The interior speaks to how managers and buyers interpreted the call to show goods. While this mode of display does employ the merchandise, it fails to really show it. As illustrated by Hinterlieter's, the draping display technique uses the merchandise as objects of décor to add color and drama to the space.

Department store interiors were also in sync with household interiors. During this time period, home decorators also employed draping as a common technique. In the Victorian and Edwardian Eras, as textile prices became more affordable, a growing number of middle-class people used fabric to decorate their homes. Critics, including Charles Eastlake, argued that drapery was in poor fashion calling it nothing more than “a milliner’s notion of the ‘pretty.’”<sup>227</sup> However, many Victorians embraced drapery within their homes, covering windows, doorways, tables, and shelves with “extravagant-looking waterfalls of fabric.”<sup>228</sup> During the 1880s and 1890s, draped fabric in domestic interiors “swaddled and softened” the hard lines of furniture and architecture, representing “material analogues to the refinement of civilization.”<sup>229</sup> The Victorian and Edwardian connotations of draped fabric in interior design can arguably be extended to the use of draping in retail environments; buyers, managers, and store executives may have employed draping to suggest refinement and to create a shopping

---

<sup>227</sup> Charles Eastlake quoted in Penny Sparke, *As Long as It's Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), 64.

<sup>228</sup> Katherine C. Grier, *Culture and Comfort: Parlor Making and Middle-Class Identity, 1850 – 1930* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2013), Kindle e-book, location 3092.

<sup>229</sup> Grier, location 3140.



atmosphere marked by sophistication. The existence of this practice in both commercial and domestic spaces further supports the idea that retail display had not yet carved out its own distinct set of practices, but rather borrowed culturally-charged display methods from a variety of sources.

A photograph of a candy display at Maillard's, a popular restaurant in New York City, further exemplifies how retailers of all kinds borrowed techniques from other fields to create dramatic displays. The display of goods showed a commitment to the over-the-top arrangements similarly found at expositions and museum exhibitions. Staged for Easter, the display exhibited eggs of all sizes, dolls, and flowers piled on to tables, creating a mountain of display. A detail of the large display table reveals the layers of merchandise. At least some of the objects on the table were intended for sale; the basket in the foreground has a paper tag attached with a string. While the motive of the candy display is to promote a holiday in Maillard's restaurant, it also epitomizes retail display practices in the early twentieth century.

Throughout the year, department store displays relied on the techniques of repetitions of goods and stacked merchandise. Store buyers and managers borrowed ideas from window dressers to create smaller-scale spectacle displays inside, illustrated by 1910 interior photos of the Abraham and Straus department store in Brooklyn. Two photos, taken from different angles, of the toiletry and accessory department illustrate how the sales floor looks overstuffed and, to our eyes, chaotic. Both photos were apparently taken after closing, as some merchandise is draped with cloth to protect it from dust and debris overnight. The interior shares similar traits with other commercial spaces, including displays that appear to use every available inch of space. A detail of the interior shows how beauty products were stacked in pyramid

shapes atop the shelves, or piled on display racks to elevate the merchandise even higher, mixing hydroxide, perfume, powder, and clocks. It is clear that retailers during this time period were convinced that the more a buyer saw, the more she might purchase. As *The Dry Goods Economist* explained in 1918: “Attractive displays catch the eye and hold the attention...a whole table of talcums or of toilet soaps or bath salts makes the customer think she needs some, more quickly than a few on a table would.”<sup>230</sup>

These dramatic displays illustrate that store managers made a conscious effort to use window-trimming techniques to arrange merchandise; however, they seemed to be unaware of how the interior as a whole functioned as a medium to display merchandise. As the images illustrate, at Abraham and Straus, the open storage on the shelves behind the counter meant that customers could see all of the boxes for the displayed products. Even though they are stacked somewhat neatly, the view of the shelves appears unfinished and sloppy to a modern viewer. As the photos demonstrate, a wider view of the retail floor shows what later display designers would regard as a chaotic sampling of merchandise and fixtures. Single products are not highlighted but piled upon cases.

In the images 4.7 and 4.8, the fixtures also contribute to the dizzying effect of the Abraham and Straus sales floor. Large, heavy, and dark-stained wood, these furnishings establish a stately atmosphere in the space. The visual plane is broken up into a series of horizontal and vertical lines created by the fixtures. Large cases line the walls and fill in the central floor space to create aisles and pathways. Tables and

---

<sup>230</sup> “The Notioneer,” *The Dry Goods Economist*, 12 January 1918, 53.

fixtures piled with merchandise disrupt the walking paths. The layout most likely did not direct customers throughout the store, but rather encouraged a broken pattern of movement throughout the space.

Department stores across the country shared similar layouts and fixtures. A color postcard of McCreery & Company in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania circa 1915 illustrates a strikingly similar interior to Brooklyn's Abraham and Straus. The photographs of both stores reveal an almost identical layout of glass cases with excess stock stored on shelves behind the counters. The image of McCreery's shows how the counter display holds limited amounts of merchandise, while cases appear to restrict shoppers' ability to handle goods. The shelves behind the counters display accessories using draping techniques for small fabric goods. The interiors show similar display practices of repetition and excess. The second bank of cases has over twenty hats covering it, all out of arm's reach. In general, the sales floors at McCreery's and Abraham and Straus offered multi-layered fields of vision exhibiting an overwhelming number of products without highlighting specific items.

As the images reveal, Hinterleiter's, McCreery's, and Abraham and Straus interiors demonstrate the window dresser's techniques of distraction and spectacle. As with windows, during this period, interior displays were about the act of *looking*; they readily presented the viewer with visions of plenty. Color, light, and glass belonged to "a new aesthetic to serve business needs. At the heart of it was the intent to show goods off day and night through all possible means."<sup>231</sup> During this time period, stacks of merchandise, displays of abundance, and draping defined the era's notion of

---

<sup>231</sup> Leach, *Land Of Desire*, 40.

showing off goods. The use of expanses of glass in show windows and display cases also helped to encourage engagement with merchandise.<sup>232</sup> While the glass barrier prevented customers from handling merchandise, it also acted as a lens through which the merchandise was transformed into objects comprising an exhibit. A measure of necessity also shaped the approach. While cases turned even ordinary merchandise into precious jewels and “objects of desire,” they also protected delicate merchandise from getting stained or broken due to mishandling or city dirt and dust.<sup>233</sup>

Glass cases in department stores paralleled the ways in which museums displayed goods. The images of the Jade Room and the Lace Room show rows of cases filled with artifacts, resembling display techniques used in department stores. The parallel use of cases also suggests that glass veils in department stores make merchandise more alluring, implying that goods were too special, or too important to be out in plain air. For museum objects, these notions seem quite appropriate, but for items such as soaps and perfume, this form of visual display imbues the merchandise with drama and desirability.

### **Display Before Visual Merchandising: “Scientific Selling”**

As window dressers began to infiltrate department store interior display with creative techniques shared by fairs and museums, a discourse rooted in the “science” of selling also emerged. Written guidelines on interior display during the first two decades of the twentieth century often came from fixtures companies and trade

---

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

publications. The photographs of Hinterleiter's, McCreery's, and Abraham and Straus, not only exemplify the style of display in early-twentieth-century department stores, they also illustrate the use of fixtures common to the period and how they functioned within retail interiors. In this era, "display" almost always signified window display, and "display men" were synonymous with window trimmers. Discussions of interior display, when present, focused on fixtures.<sup>234</sup> The absence of discussion on principles of interior merchandise display highlights the view at the time that window display was the most powerful form of merchandising. However, in historicizing the discourse surrounding fixtures during the first two decades of the twentieth century, the story of agency in department store design comes to light, as does an understanding of the evolution of the aesthetics and intents of interior display.

The ways in which the trade discussed fixtures illustrates how retail and trade executives envisioned the interior of a store: it was a place to efficiently hold stock for a short period of time in an organized manner. Show windows lured customers inside where salespeople could sell merchandise to them. The discussions of fixtures during the 1910s and 1920s mark the beginnings of a shift from considering fixtures as tools

---

<sup>234</sup> A reader wrote in to ask The Merchants Record and Show Window help section for advice on learning how to be a "display man." The answer suggested their own book *The Art of Decorating*, which contained "over 400 pages, covering all the phases of window display..." *The Merchants Record and Show Window* 44, no. 1 (January 1919): 56. For example the following titles, while they appear to be complete discussions of display, almost ignore interior display with small sections on fixtures: *Miscellaneous Merchandise Decorations: Collection of Artistic Display* (Scranton: International Textbook Company, 1905); Roger Lewis, *The Art of Decorating Show Windows and Displaying Merchandise* (Chicago: The Merchants Record Company, 1924). The lack of discussion on interior merchandise display illustrates that it was not yet a topic of importance.

that promoted staff efficiency to considering fixtures as vehicles unto themselves capable of selling more goods. The shift can be traced to the development of the notion of “scientific selling.” Scientific selling first came into use in the early twentieth century. An initial definition is found in *The Business Man’s Library: Book on Selling: The Principles of the Science of Salesmanship; Methods and Systems of Selling in Various Lines*, published in 1905. The book claimed its postulates relied on scientific judgment, though the “science of selling” was in a mere “formative stage;” the approach was said to trump intuition in as a means to present “a mosaic of facts concerning selling and salesmanship.”<sup>235</sup> The first chapter “Training for Selling—How the Principles of Salesmanship are Applied,” by W.A. Waterbury, Sales Manager at the Chicago office supply business A.B. Dick Company, defined scientific selling as the core of successful salesmanship tactics. He first defined “ordinary salesmanship” as embracing “only the simple exchange of merchandise for an equivalent,”<sup>236</sup> He also noted that “scientific salesmanship involves continual study. When the scientific salesman sells a bill of goods he applies his mind to a consideration of the surroundings and conditions governing that sale to ascertain how he can duplicate it with less expense of time, labor, or money, and with a prospect of a greater amount of profit.”<sup>237</sup>

---

<sup>235</sup> *The Business Man’s Library: Book on Selling: The Principles of the Science of Salesmanship; Methods and Systems of Selling in Various Lines* (Chicago-New York: The System Company, 1905), iv.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*

Waterbury's definition of the term created a baseline for future definitions of scientific selling that relied on his concept of close study of environments and merchandising to garner a greater profit with reduced expenses. The 1905 definition, however, instilled the idea that scientific selling was the job of a human being, the salesman. Waterbury continued with a description of the traits and characteristics of the "scientific salesman," writing that he "studies his own character as well as his customer's peculiarities...his shoes are polished a little oftener, his clothes are pressed more frequently...[he] is always polite...the scientific salesman must have absolute self-control...he makes permanent records and files them for reference."<sup>238</sup>

Waterbury's description distinguished the scientific salesman from an ordinary clerk by highlighting his system: scientific salesmen analyzed each encounter, kept notes, and created a personal process to better remember clients and create scenarios to more easily close deals. It is the process of analysis and record keeping that links this salesman to a scientific method, or as Waterbury previously stated, to the "study of selling goods."<sup>239</sup>

As the century progressed, the definition of scientific selling expanded to include some physical components of the store. In *Retail Selling and Store Management*, published in 1914, Paul H. Neystrom discussed the science of selling as reaching beyond the power of the salesman, who still, however, remained an integral player. Neystrom, an Assistant Professor of Political Economy at the University of Wisconsin wrote the book while instructing the university's Retail Selling course. He

---

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 10-12.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 9.

argued: “It is clear that a sale brings together the following factors: the salesman, the goods, the manner of selling, and the customer.”<sup>240</sup> While Neystrom offered a few pages on store interior and exterior appearance, his book focused mainly on the on the salesman. Much like the work of Waterbury, Neystrom described very similar traits, characteristics, and tactics that a salesman could employ in order approach selling scientifically.

These early works show that scientific selling seemed to be a businessman’s term much more closely aligned with notions of skilled selling than actual science. Neystrom included the word “scientific” twenty times and the word “science” fifteen times making his intention clear: to link science and retailing. At the turn of the twentieth century, the notions of progress and new technology defined the concept of modernity. Members of the retail trade, such as Waterbury and Neystrom, articulated the modern aspects of their business by defining it as a scientific system. The scientific part of this early definition appeared to stem from the salesman’s ability to keep records, analyze sales, and create a system to repeat results as desired. The system, however, hinged on the ability to appropriately assess and react to a situation, using notes as guidance, and not an actual shared theoretical framework. In both of these works, the words “science” and “scientific” come across merely as buzzwords—perhaps not a surprise, considering the popularity of Taylor’s *The Principles of Scientific Management* from 1911. Taylor, a trained engineer, argued that the close study and analysis of each step of a process could lead to the ability to create more

---

<sup>240</sup> Paul Neystrom, *Retail Selling and Store Management* (New York: Appleton, 1914), 9.



efficient systems by reducing the amount of wasted time or energy between tasks.<sup>241</sup> Essentially treating men as machines, scientific management controlled the movements of men and the speed at which they acted, making it an easy concept for industrial production to adopt. Many industries attempted to employ the concepts of scientific management in their systems, or they at least used its rhetoric. Neystrom explained the applicability of scientific management in the chapter “Efficiency and Store Organization:”

The main features of any science are, first, the gathering together of the common experiences of those engaged in the same work; second, the analysis of these experiences to determine the reasons for the success of some methods of procedure and for the failure of others; and third, a restatement of those reasons in such terms as to make them applicable elsewhere.<sup>242</sup>

Taken as a whole, Neystrom’s book failed in its discussion of scientific management as it could be applied to retailing. His advice on display techniques lacked substance as he merely suggested high-level ideas such as “color harmony,” “what constitutes good display,” and “attracting attention,” without actually explaining how to achieve any of those objectives. Neystrom’s discussion highlighted his belief that salesmen, above all else, closed sales. Display only played a small supporting role. He wrote, “Display draws attention in order that the store and its salesmen may sell goods.”<sup>243</sup> Still, Neystrom’s inclusion of scientific management in his text, as well as his

---

<sup>241</sup> Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management*.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>243</sup> Neystrom, 132.

reoccurring use of the terms science and scientific, illustrate the formation of a research-driven method to excel in retailing.

Beyond the link to notions of efficiency, and creating a reliable system that would ensure the sales of goods, scientific selling was a set of ideal sales practices used by successful salesmen no matter what they were selling. Neystrom highlighted this idea in a discussion of “suggestive selling.” Essentially, the skill of a salesmen allowed him to convince customers to purchase more goods or upgrade what they intended to buy. Similar notions of efficiency and scientific method were quickly applied to discussions of display techniques and, as early as 1914, some fixture companies regarded fixtures as “salesmen.” “Add these salesmen to your force,” a Fisher-Stevens Company advertisement says referring to the seven different fixtures on the page.<sup>244</sup> In calling the fixtures themselves “salesmen,” this advertisement suggests the beginning of displacement of salespeople by inanimate objects.

Fixture manufactures and special services provided by trade journals offered retailers help and advice on how to arrange fixtures and cases.<sup>245</sup> *The Dry Goods Reporter* advertised The Store Fixture Department in a 1914 “Store Equipment and Window Display Monthly.” It gave free of charge “advice practically impossible to get anywhere else” on the “planning of a new or remodeled store, the choosing of new

---

<sup>244</sup> Fisher-Stevens Company Advertisement, *The Dry Goods Reporter* 21 February 1914, 52.

<sup>245</sup> *The Dry Goods Reporter* had a special section “Store Equipment and Window Display Monthly” and *The Dry Good Economist* published “Store Service and Equipment Section.” Dedicated to topics concerning display, these special sections during the 1910s focused mainly on window display or discussions of fixtures.

equipment and the installing of show windows.”<sup>246</sup> Companies such as Joseph Knittel Show Case Company, The Wilmarth Show Case Company, Quincy Show Case Works, and The Grand Rapids Showcase Company offered design advice and interior planning to retail establishments. Discussions on the importance of the style and quality of fixtures and cases rapidly expanded during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Fixtures, considered furnishings, were often matching suites crafted by case and fixture manufacturers; the arrangement and layout were fixed once installed. Still, the Joseph Knittel Show Case Company Catalog from 1910 demonstrates that customers purchased singular fixtures as well as total store arrangements as illustrated by a “Drug Store Outfit.” The prices for larger sets were “on application,” suggesting that the company tailored the sets to each customer’s specific space needs.<sup>247</sup>

Through their own catalogs and advertisements in trade journals, fixture companies targeted clients with promises of more beautiful stores, better-organized displays, and of course, increased sales. Trade organizations and fixtures companies competed with each other over who could offer better advice and generate more sales. In 1913, The Grand Rapids Show Case Company published “How to Merchandise the New Way,” a booklet customers could request free of charge. The company advertised the booklet in a number of trade periodicals including *The Merchant’s Record and Show Window*, *Inland Storekeeper*, and *The Clothier and Furnisher*. It was broadly

---

<sup>246</sup> “Let Us Help Plan Your Store: Store Equipment and Window Display Monthly,” *The Dry Goods Reporter*, 21 February 1914.

<sup>247</sup> Joseph Knittel Show Case Company, *Catalog No. 25* (Quincy: The Company, 1910), 72-76.

advertised and touted as “a complete answer to the questions of the dealer who realizes that out of date methods are stunting the growth of his business, but who has not known just how to remedy them.” It could offer “better and more profitable selling methods. Containing as it does the result of many years’ experience in planning thousands of stores...”<sup>248</sup> The Grand Rapids Showcase Company quelled any fears of expensive, new display methods and argued that the birth of a new standard in retail design, or “The New Way,” was intended to create a closer connection between merchants and customers. “The New Way” focused on specialized fixtures that moved stock from closed drawers to glass cases, which allowed customers to see a larger selection of better organized merchandise, ultimately reducing operating costs while increasing profits. Grand Rapids positioned the company as the best place to learn about these methods and how to implement them in stores.

The Grand Rapids Showcase Company advertised “How to Merchandise the New Way,” by stressing the importance of sales floor design. The conversation, while rooted in the language of “scientific selling,” also evokes the goals of window trimmers, calling for “showing goods” in an illustrative mode to increase their appeal: “The ‘New Way’ brings the goods into closer contact with the consumer: that it displays them more effectively and to greater advantage: and that the consumer instinctively uses the merchant’s attitude towards the ‘New Way’ as a gauge of the merchant’s own opinion of his stock, and his ideal of taking care of his customers.”<sup>249</sup> The company argued that fixtures and cases imbued merchandise with desirability. The storekeeper’s

---

<sup>248</sup> *The Merchant’s Record and Show Window*, January 1913, 53.

<sup>249</sup> Advertisement, *The Clothier and Furnisher*, 82, February 1914, 143.

goal to highlight and protect his goods also elevated customers' associations with those goods because it showcased them behind glass. In addition to embracing the connection between the customer and merchandise, the company also argued that the "New Way" resulted in more profitable business. Company officials cited over 3,000 stores that were using it to "reduce their selling costs all around."<sup>250</sup> They also suggested even more astonishing results, asking readers, "You want to know how merchants are increasing their trade forty to seventy-five percent by putting in the 'New Way' in place of outworn methods and fixtures?"<sup>251</sup> The Grand Rapids Showcase Company pushed readers to take their advice (and purchase their fixtures) to remain current. They implied that changing interior fixtures and displays resulted in a huge increase in sales and profits by showing a larger portion of goods for purchase. While the Grand Rapids Showcase Company's self-promotion must be taken with a grain of salt, it illustrates the language of the larger discourse as well as retailers' specific areas of concern. The interiors of Hinterleiter's, McCreery's, and Abraham and Straus exemplify the desire to showcase merchandise using a system of display similar to the one used by the Grand Rapids Showcase Company, suggesting the "New Way" was not specific to their fixtures but rather part of a larger movement in display design and the concept of scientific selling.

From 1910 to 1920, discussion about fixtures filled trade journals. Competition to The Grand Rapids Showcase Company's "New Way" appeared in a number of articles and advertisements about fixtures in *The Inland Storekeeper* and *The Clothier*

---

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> *Inland Storekeeper*, 6 (March 1913): 433.

*and Furnisher* that same year. Companies relied on statistics and alluded to scientific study to sell their products. Not to be outdone by The Grand Rapids Showcase Company's "New Way," The Welch Manufacturing Company advertised their specialized knowledge: "We want to show you how to improve your store, probably increase its capacity 50%, thus enabling you to handle the merchandise in a more attractive, economical manner."<sup>252</sup> The company argued that their free "expert design service" and state of the art fixtures would result in easier selling by allowing all stock to be seen: "In this cabinet every garment can be seen and by two simple operations requiring but a fraction of a minute, they can all be brought right out in front of the customer. This is the kind of service even the most critical can appreciate. It makes selling easier."<sup>253</sup> Fixture companies such as The Grand Rapids Showcase Company and The Welch Manufacturing Company positioned not only their products, but also their company's expertise, as leaders in the field.

While fixture companies stressed the importance of a beautiful environment, their advertisements also focused on improved organization and stock handling as selling points. The advertisements echoed the writing promoting scientific selling, except, in this discourse, fixtures—not people—created efficiency. A Quincy Show Case Works advertisement noted of these "special cases": "Your displays will attract more attention...because they are made to fit exactly every display need. They protect goods from dust, flies, and handling. The cases themselves enhance the appearance of your store, giving beauty, dignity, and refinement, along with maximum

---

252 Merchant's Record and Show Window February 1913, 3.

253 Ibid.

efficiency.”<sup>254</sup> These advertisements, while intending to sell more fixtures, suggest that organization and efficiency ranked foremost in the minds of retailers. They also reveal the beginnings of the shift from scientific selling to visual merchandising: the conversations and text both clearly imply that fixtures could replace salesmen.

Perhaps in response to the “New Way’s” 1913 publication, that year trade journals bolstered the sentiment found in competitive fixture advertisements—possibly in hopes of securing more advertising revenue. In order to sell the most goods, it seemed, all a store needed was modern fixtures. In 1913, *Inland Storekeeper* published an article entitled “Modern Equipment, An Investment,” which echoed the tone and wording of advertisements from that same year. Author A. E. Edgar discussed the significant changes he saw in his dry goods store after investing in “high-quality fixtures.” Calling his store “dingy” and “shabby” prior to the renovation, Edgar said he looked for three main components in new fixtures: “appearance, utility, durability.”<sup>255</sup> He shared images of stores with model interiors including the Bee Hive Department Store in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Calling that establishment “the largest and best equipped store in the northwest,” Edgar suggested that the space was the pinnacle of 1913 department store interior design. The photo caption notes that the store was completely outfitted with Fisher-Stevens fixtures. In fact, each of the photographic illustrations in the article show the entire project designed by a display case company, solidifying the point that “the best equipped” spaces were those

---

<sup>254</sup> Advertisement, *Inland Storekeeper* 6 (March 1913): 498.

<sup>255</sup> A. E. Edgar, “Modern Equipment, An Investment,” *Inland Storekeeper* 6(March 1913): 290.

designed by the display companies themselves. In the image, the perimeter wall of Bee Hive Department Store is lined with shelving units with glass cases positioned in front, allowing customers to see, but not touch, items within. Counters and tables are piled high with less valuable or delicate merchandise, much like the 1910 Abraham and Straus interiors. While cases enabled customers to see merchandise, the abundant stock and compact arrangement neither highlighted nor showcased specific items or styles. This was presented as the most powerful way to organize a retail space of its time.

The same issue of *Inland Storekeeper* contained another editorial on fixtures, “Making Goods Sell Themselves.” It noted that installing new fixtures could generate a stronger customer base and more sales by showing goods in glass cases, creating an “organized” interior, and using “up-to-date” fixtures to “systematize” goods. A “store planned for the greatest convenience to customers” is “systematized and arranged so that all merchandise receives the best possible individual display, and this cannot be accomplished with rough counters, unfinished case-board shelving. The best trimmed window attracts the most attention, the most neatly arranged goods in the best show cases win the largest trade.”<sup>256</sup> Like his contemporaries, the author suggested that customers were more attracted to stores that looked similar to the Bee Hive Department Store and were more apt to purchase goods when stores upheld those contemporary ideas of arrangement and design. He further noted, “A mussy sore carries with it an impression of mussy, low-grade goods.”<sup>257</sup>

---

<sup>256</sup> Frederick Arnold Farrar, “Making Goods Sell Themselves,” *Inland Storekeeper* 6(March 1913): 295.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.



By 1920, the same sales pitch remained, but store fixtures began to evolve away from Victorian styles. In their 1920 catalog, *Getting Behind the Retail Business*, the Grand Rapids Showcase Company still discussed the importance of display as “one of the first steps towards getting more people into the store.”<sup>258</sup> The company urged retailers to tidy up shop explaining that “people seek attractiveness today, because they’re being educated. They see it on every hand; they don’t like to walk out of a neat home and go into an untidy, careless looking store, and they won’t do it so long as there are more attractive places where they can shop.”<sup>259</sup>

An image included in the catalog compares two interior displays and asks, “Which of these departments will attract more customers, and which will sell more merchandise?” The first, representing the inferior display, shows a sturdy, wooden sales counter with merchandise sectioned by small bins and a back wall of shelves, filled with stock in boxes. The second image illustrates the better design, which uses Grand Rapids Showcase Company’s fixtures. The counter consists of a long glass display case, framed in wood, with an organized and open stock unit behind the counter. While the textual descriptions from the early 1910s and 1920 sound fairly similar, the two images highlight a shift in design philosophy. The first image of the comparison strikingly resembles those that Edgar deemed “best equipped” in his 1913 article for *Inland Storekeeper* and referring to the stacked boxes behind the counters at Abraham and Straus. The Grand Rapids Showcase Company’s new design shows

---

<sup>258</sup> Grand Rapids Showcase Company, *Getting Behind the Retail Business* (Grand Rapids, MI: Grand Rapids Showcase Company, 1920).

<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

closed shelving systems behind cases as the mark of an organized and pleasant environment. The new system of organization removes excessive merchandise from the top of glass cases and creates pared down selling spaces. The Grand Rapids Showcase Company's 1920 catalog parallels advancements in the professionalization of interior display. The new catalog visuals suggest that by the 1920s, the two discourses that existed in the beginning of the century—the window trimmers display tactics and the trade and fixture companies' reliance on scientific selling—merged into one larger discourse that fueled display philosophy within the retail trade.

### **Professionalization of Interior Display**

By the mid-1920s, store managers began to create specialized interior display departments, perhaps displacing the power and expertise held by fixture companies in the early part of the century. As department store managers focused more intently on interior display in the 1920s, new roles developed, and a need for trained employees emerged. The professionalization of interior display marks an important period in the “visual merchandising” timeline because it establishes the existence of a person solely responsible for interior display within each department store; thus agency shifts from larger fixture companies and trade journals to the store leaders themselves.

In 1926, Arthur Lazarus identified the role of the “display manager” in his book *Department Store Organization*. He noted that the display manager “supervised” all interior display, and, “to determine the amount of display and how many ledges should carry display,” floor managers and buyers should “confer” with display

managers.<sup>260</sup> Lazarus suggests that early display managers worked very closely with buyers and managers who would have been responsible for display in the past.

Analysis of professional discourse on interior display reveals that a general accepted model still did not exist by the early 1940s. *Retailing* pointed out that some store managers still believed best practice meant showing customers everything available, while others selected specific products to highlight. While retailers differed in their views about the best ways to construct interior displays, trade publications such as *Retailing*, along with a growing number of training manuals, encouraged stores to carefully select and construct them.<sup>261</sup> In 1944, *The Journal of Retailing* published an article that discussed the history and current state of interior display. The piece bolstered ideas published by *Retailing* a few years earlier and strengthened the case for the impact of interior display. Author Charles J. Shevlin declared that display was “becoming an independent selling medium, not simply an adjunct to advertising and personal salesmanship.”<sup>262</sup> Tracing the development of modern display methods, the author called the “modernistic” displays at the 1925 Universal Exposition in Paris a turning point. He noted that the new approach quelled the “backward child” techniques of window dressers to cram as many things in one place as possible. As he saw it, earlier window displays resembled a stage with a “hideous array” of plants,

---

<sup>260</sup> Arthur Lazarus, *Department Store Organization* (New York: Dry Goods Economist, 1926), 165.

<sup>261</sup> “Interior Display Heads for a Boom,” *Retailing*, 13 February 1939.

<sup>262</sup> Charles J Shevlin, “Trends on Display,” *Journal of Retailing*, October 1944.

vases, trellises without the “slightest relation” to merchandise.<sup>263</sup> He illustrated how trends in merchandise display once again looked towards displays of art and design for direction. Just as the displays in earlier department stores appeared similar to those in art museums, notions of Modernism informed new ideas about the display of art, and ultimately department store merchandise.

Just as Jerome Koerber transitioned from window trimmer to display manager, many other men became partners in creating innovative visual displays; however, it can be difficult to identify their work. The career of J. Ullman Stewart (1896 – 1954), director of display for Kahn’s Department Store in Oakland, California from 1926 to 1954, exemplifies the evolution from window trimmer to director of display. Throughout his career, Stewart compiled a collection of his drawings, designs, selected notes, papers, and photographs of Kahn’s window displays and interiors. The archive, now in the collection of The Baker Library at Harvard Business School, offers access to the career and work of a director of display in a mid-sized department store. Stewart’s papers are laden with photographs and designs for window displays; this alludes to the fact that, like many display executives, Stewart’s roots lay in window trimming.

The collection’s slant towards window displays illustrates how the theatrical nature of Stewart’s windows crept into his designs for interiors. Stewart’s 1927 designs are theatrical and eye-catching, but they break away almost entirely from the spectacle and abundance that characterized early display practices. In one photo, a deep window evokes a stage set with draped fabric as the backdrop, imitating a stage

---

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

curtain. Spotlights beam on two mannequins wearing cocktail attire; they appearing as if they are performing on the stage, while the rest of the display appears dark. The focus here is not excessive display of merchandise (as almost none is present beyond the models' clothing) but rather on creating a captivating display to attract customers and highlight specific articles of clothing.

Stewart's drawings and photos demonstrate the link between interior display and store promotions; they suggest that stores viewed interior display as an extension of advertising in from 1920s through the 1950s. In 1939, an article in *Retailing* noted that the director of display had coordinated interior displays with both window display and advertising.<sup>264</sup> As the roots of interior display lay in window trimming, it is not surprising that stores viewed interior display through a promotional lens and used it as a tool to attract attention. Stewart's drawings for a "desert promotion" in 1946 reveal how he integrated displays for promotions throughout the store. The drawings depict yellow and green hues, palm leaves, succulents, and bright colored pottery for displays in the men's department and the ladies' sports shop. Stewart designed these special displays with a concurrent theme for counters, wall niches, ledges, and floor units with mannequins. As a unit, the store reflects the desert promotion and departments take on a whimsical flair with the bright decoration. A photograph showing a window or ledge display, likely part of the desert promotion, points to the disconnection between the promotional display and the merchandise. A desert theme presents a palm wallpaper background with an arrangement of succulent plants flanked by two mannequins. One of them wears a winter coat with a fur collar and the other dons a suit with a muff on her arm. While the desert theme populates the window, the mannequins are dressed for

---

<sup>264</sup> "Interior Display."

a chic winter outing. Here the stylized, theatrical display ignores the merchandise and acts solely as a colorful distraction.

A look at Stewart's interiors suggests that the designer was moving into "visual merchandising" with "stage sets" for goods. His interior display techniques delivered whimsical ideas within a contemporary framework of display practice. Stewart used modern fixtures and shelving to house and stock merchandise. His papers also demonstrate that he worked to keep up with industry trends by subscribing to trade periodicals including *Views and Reviews* and *Modern Display* and by collecting display catalogs and brochures of fixture manufacturers.

Just as earlier store interior design techniques paralleled world's fairs exhibitions and the display of art, so too did retail interiors in the throes of modernization. Stewart's designs illustrate this parallel. In *The Modern Eye: Stieglitz, MoMA, and the Art of Exhibition, 1925-1934*, Wilson explores the changes in how museums presented modern art to the general public. She argues that as modern art became more mainstream, exhibitions in the interwar years "can be linked to a broader movement among museums to make their collections accessible to the general public."<sup>265</sup> Wilson posits that galleries and museums achieved accessibility through new modes of displaying art. Display moved away from the salon model of paintings in heavy, gilded frames, organized by genre or size, and crammed together on tall walls. Instead, the new mode of display, introduced in the late-nineteenth century by modern European artists and embraced by Alfred Stieglitz in the interwar era, hung art in one line with ample space between each work. The galleries became less crowded,

---

<sup>265</sup> Kristina Wilson, *The Modern Eye: Stieglitz, MoMA, and the Art of Exhibition, 1924-1935* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 3.

and visitors had the opportunity to focus on one piece at a time.<sup>266</sup> Wilson argues that this type of display allowed visitors to engage more directly with the artwork. In his projects, Stewart eliminated visual overload common in early-twentieth-century department stores and directed customers to focus on specific merchandise using a curated selection of goods.

Wilson also reports that in 1925, Stieglitz left piles of paintings leaning against the wall in his Intimate Gallery and encouraged the visitor, in his words, to “browse around and find the things that pleased him.”<sup>267</sup> This mode of display evoked the ways in which consumers experienced self-service at department stores in the mid-century. While store interiors highlighted a number of goods, fixtures invited customers to browse through merchandise and self-select pieces for purchase. Just as Stieglitz gave visitors more authority to view works on their own and trusted them to make appropriate decisions on taste, so too did department stores as they introduced more self-selection.

Two 1937 interiors, the Swim Shop and the Ski Hut, display the fusion of Stewart’s theatrical past with modern display techniques. In the photographs, both departments show Hollywood set-like designs as if each were portraying a scene. Upon visiting the Swim Shop, a floor display introduces customers to the department and blends merchandising techniques with whimsical display. The image illustrates a large multi-sided, stand-alone unit highlights goods for sale using a mannequin and a garment fixture staged with appropriate bathing accessories to suggest fashionable

---

<sup>266</sup> Wilson, 33-24.

<sup>267</sup> Stieglitz quoted in Wilson, 47.

items and buying combinations. The display allows customers to select some items directly from the built-in shelves without sales help. Behind the display, as shown, shelves line the wall of the Swim Shop allowing suits to be arranged by size and color. The two counters in front of the shelving suggest that customers probably received help from sales personnel, if they were available, who would pull the merchandise from the exposed stock racks. The openness of the units, however, suggests that clients could also help themselves to selecting merchandise. This method of arrangement and display highlighted the trend to keep stock within an arm's reach, rather than in a back room or warehouse. It also suggested the gradual shift from full to self-service departments, acting as a transition between the two.

The space shows how Stewart's design for the Ski Hut takes the form of a timber lodge covered in snow. A seasonal façade transforms the standard display units in the department into a haven for shoppers traveling on vacations. The seasonal department not only resembles a theatrical stage, but likely employs the same techniques and materials as set design to make it easily assembled and disassembled. Merchandise displays include a mannequin fully dressed in ski attire standing below the department sign, and a counter display highlighting a pair of pants, a scarf, and gloves. These two displays offer shoppers ideas on how to combine pieces.

In this department, beyond the wall on the right, standard shelving includes hanger bars so the cubbies can be used also as hanging units. Unlike the Swim Shop, the Ski Shop holds little reserved stock. Shelving units in the Ski Hut hold just four or five of each piece, suggesting that the department sold only limited specialty sizing and stock. Stewart's ability to adapt displays between departments housing excess stock and specialty departments storing limited stock signifies the importance of



catering to specific departments. Stewart likely worked with department managers and buyers to learn their needs and to create displays that were both theatrical and functional. The open units with built-in lighting invite customers to browse, but the limited stock and counter in front of the display maintain the need for a salesperson to help.

Stewart prioritized his experiments with new merchandising techniques in departments with the most fashion-conscious shoppers. A photograph of the toy department, from the same year, shows an out-of-date interior with old merchandising techniques. Tall ceilings with their original architectural detail and lighting create a background for a cluttered toy department evoking early-twentieth-century display techniques of merchandise piled high, with objects repeatedly displayed. The department does not have the same streamlined, modernized feel as other departments in the store which suggests that Stewart and Kahn's management focused new merchandising techniques in areas where adult shoppers would purchase goods for themselves. Shoppers visiting the toy department might have different intentions, or they were child shoppers who would respond well an area filled with an abundance of everything their hearts desired.

The "Kahn's Department Store Photographs and Ephemera, 1926-1954" archive represents a pivotal point in merchandising and display. The images and designs from Stewart's collection highlight how department stores attempted to move towards modern methods of showcasing merchandise without completely abandoning the theatrical atmosphere of early-twentieth-century window display. Stewart's story is just one of many different histories of how and where department stores in the mid-century moved away from the designs supplied by fixture companies to create unique

and creative store interiors that catered to their own shoppers. The future development of visual merchandising necessitated the development of a distinct display department. Years later, in his 1952 textbook *Window and Interior Display*, Robert Kretschmer identified the importance of the role carved out by men such as Stewart. “The display director, whether his domain is a large department store or a small retail outlet, must first of all be a *merchandiser* and a *visualizer*,” he wrote. “The old school thought that he must be primarily an artist has vanished in this day of specialization.”<sup>268</sup> Kretschmer’s new display director “must be constantly dreaming up new settings; he must be constantly on the lookout for new and clever ideas.”<sup>269</sup> Kretschmer’s thoughts highlighted the difference between the window trimmer and the display director. Trained as artists and set designers, window trimmers’ strengths lay in their ability to create a stunning visual.<sup>270</sup> Display directors were now responsible for directing customers toward purchases. The visual shift apparent in the pared-down, modernistic nature of Stewart’s designs illustrates the early formation of the notion of “visual merchandising.”

### **The Introduction of “Visual Merchandising”**

While conceptualized in modern art museums, the speed with which new display techniques made their way into mainstream department stores was slowed due to the depression and World War II. However, after the war retailers undertook

---

<sup>268</sup> Robert Kretschmer, *Window and Interior Display* (Scranton: Laurel Publishers, 1952), 8.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>270</sup> Leach, *Land Of Desire*, 55-70.

renewed efforts to define best practices in interior display as they renovated old stores and built new ones. Discussions in the late 1930s pointed towards postwar changes. Retail trade publications began to discuss interior display differently than in the previous decade, identifying some of the parallels with the new, stripped-down exhibition display. Journals identified specific methods for department store success, which hinged on the establishment of interior display departments. *Retailing* reported on the new trends in interior display in a 1939 article titled “Interior Display Heads for a Boom.” The article noted that B. Altman’s, Lord & Taylor, and Macy’s all created separate divisions for interior display within the stores’ display departments. The establishment of these separate departments shows that more retail executives recognized the potential impact of interior display, as Kahn’s and Strawbridge and Clothier had years earlier. *Retailing* reported that interior display supplemented the efforts of sales personnel; one store alone saw a 200 percent increase in sales during its test period of new interior display techniques.<sup>271</sup> The periodical called the techniques “low cost” and “productive” — buzzwords linked to both the scientific salesmen of the turn-of-the-century and the fixture companies of the early twentieth century—suggesting that interior display had descended from these earlier techniques. However, unlike earlier discussion of fixtures, this newer discourse outlined exactly how merchants could achieve success.

By the 1940s, ideas and observations regarding display developed into a broader discussion of shopping habits that explored impulse buying and return on investment. Finally, research and metrics fueled the commentary on display. By the

---

<sup>271</sup> “Interior Display.”

late 1940s, the groundbreaking statistics set forth by Shevlin's article in *The Journal of Retailing* were amplified by a growing professional discourse that helped define the notion of "visual merchandising." Shevlin outlined how retailers began to study consumer behavior and how interior display affected that behavior. One study noted that sixty-two percent of people had purchased merchandise on impulse, and that forty-two percent of merchandise sold was an impulse buy, of which seventy-five percent was on a display case.<sup>272</sup> The study highlighted the power of fixtures and display, especially with regards to impulse buying. These initial studies from that period begin to document the professionalization of the field of display.

In 1946 and 1947, The United States Department of Commerce published a series of teaching guides, the Small Business Manuals, which presented a new approach to considering interior display. Originally printed by the War Department for education within the Armed Forces, following the war, the government made the series available to the public. In 1946 and 1947, they published *Establishing and Operating an Apparel Store* and *Merchandise Display for Simplified Service in Department and Specialty Stores*, respectively. The National Retail Dry Goods Association, a leading organization for information on trade practices, reviewed the manuscript for *Establishing and Operating an Apparel Store*. Both publications offered directions and advice for the retail trade. With respect to interior display, the first book contained one chapter that examined layout, fixtures, and equipment, offering little more than a checklist of how to begin thinking of interior spaces. On the other hand, one year later, *Merchandise Display for Simplified Service in Department*

---

<sup>272</sup> Shevlin.

*and Specialty Stores* specifically addressed ways of organizing and displaying goods and how to use fixtures to negotiate between self-selection and full service. The book presented a detailed discussion on the different styles and methods of employing fixtures and display in department stores.

Appropriate fixtures had the potential to alter the interior atmosphere. The draw of new fixtures came not only from their shiny finish, but also from new materials and manufacturing techniques, and from an ability to display and store merchandise. In *Merchandise Display for Simplified Service in Department and Specialty Stores*, the Department of Commerce reviewed the new methods of open selling and highlighted the positive features for both retail establishments and customers. Noting the existence of a number of different names for the same phenomenon—“self-selection,” “quick service,” “semi-self-service,” “preselection,” “easy selection,” “modified selling,” and “visual merchandising”—the author argued that three common characteristics were key to the success of the method: the systems mediated the relationship between customer and salesperson, allowed the customer to shop with less help from sales personnel, and gave “better service to the customer” than could be achieved with the existing sales staff.<sup>273</sup> The manual devoted large sections to explaining how department stores might employ open display techniques on both a small and large scale, how that controlled the number and type of sales personnel needed, and how choice altered the atmosphere and experience of the store. One chapter dissected the different systems of display. It analyzed the ways in which

---

<sup>273</sup> E.R. Hawkins and Carl E. Wolf, Jr., *Merchandise Display for Simplified Service in Department and Specialty Stores* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947), 2.

customers interacted and purchased goods from closed-stock departments, featured assortment displays that showed a few items but required customers to ask for stock, and finally examined selling-stock displays. In 1955 *Women's Wear Daily* lauded McAlpin's new branch store outside of Cincinnati for its "self-selection" fixtures.<sup>274</sup> The image included by *Women's Wear Daily* illustrates how certain hanging fixtures could hold at least thirty shirts on each side, eliminating the need for deep stock rooms. Another image from *Women's Wear Daily* illustrates the fixtures inside Ed. Schuster & Co., Inc. in Milwaukee. The caption stresses that the "open fixtures" make "merchandise both visible and accessible."<sup>275</sup> The image shows island fixtures that hold children's undergarments. Behind the islands, tiered glass shelves organize and display undershirts while hanging racks hold crinolines. The amount of merchandise on display in both of these images slightly recalls earlier department stores that touted visions of plenty. However, in these mid-century images, while there is an abundance of merchandise, we see much more organized spaces that attempt to highlight a few selected pieces of clothing. Just as in McAlpin's, Ed. Schuster & Co., and Loewy's designs for Gimbels, and Foley's, the open fixtures allowed customers to see merchandise, browse, and select their size without assistance from sales associates, which aided in the creation of a more efficient sales floor.

Fixture types influenced how department stores and specific departments within could operate and serve customers. Upscale retailers, or those committed to

---

<sup>274</sup> McAlpin's, Western Hills Plaza, Ohio, *Women's Wear Daily*, April 6, 1955, 37.

<sup>275</sup> Ed. Schuster & Co., Inc., Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1956. *Women's Wear Daily* 93:114 (December 12, 1956), 41.

older methods of retailing, often kept the majority of stock in closed rooms. In order to transition to selling-stock displays (open displays), retailers needed to upgrade their fixtures to ones that could hold most of their stock; they also needed to reconsider departmentalization and stock organization. The Department of Commerce argued that using open fixtures led to increased selling success: “This type of operation is the most flexible of all because selling assistance is not required but is provided if desired.”<sup>276</sup> The method prevented displays from impeding browsing by customers and allowed shoppers to select exactly the merchandise they wished to purchase, reducing the average selling time per purchase. In addition to helping clients with faster transactions, the open fixtures helped sales personnel keep track of stock and find items more quickly. Departments might display one or two items to highlight popular trends and direct purchases, but customers shopped and pursued inventory with limited sales help. Supporters presented the system as more efficient and cost effective because it required fewer employees, allowed for easier management of stock, and assured fast transaction times.

It is important to note that the use of the term “visual merchandising” is lumped into the list of terms regarding self-service; it indicates the shift towards a “science” of display. A defining moment in the development of the study of “visual merchandising” came in 1949 when the National Association of Display Industries, in conjunction with the New York University School of Retailing, launched the Visual Merchandising Research Series with a pilot study on display that boasted Howard M. Cowee (1915 - 1992) of the NYU School of Retailing as the principal author. Cowee

---

<sup>276</sup> Hawkins and Wolf, 25.

also served as the display research director for the National Retail Dry Goods Association, a role he held while directing the study. Prior to publication in 1949, Cowee presented his findings at the 1947 NRDGA convention. As the study progressed, it was covered in a number of *New York Times* articles.<sup>277</sup> The study offers insight into a moment of change unfolding, as display became a heavily researched topic. The pilot report hoped to accomplish three major objectives:

(1) To develop methods of learning facts about display that could be organized and classified for analysis and comparison; (2) to disseminate the information deemed immediately useful in making display an increasingly more productive force in the distribution of goods and services; and (3) to determine areas that merit detailed future investigation in the continuing study of display.<sup>278</sup>

The goals aligned the study with the growing field of consumer research. No such study of display existed despite retailers' commitment to the idea that people purchased things that they saw. In an effort to create a proven method for arranging displays, the study based its findings on close observation of what it termed "the ocular behavior of traffic at, or close to, points of sale."<sup>279</sup> "Visual merchandising"

---

<sup>277</sup> "NYU Retailing School Makes Boor Man Assistant Professor," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 8 July 1947, 18; "Window Displays Hailed as Medium: NYU Study in Which 1,291,000 Persons Were Observed Is Reported to Association Women Most Curious," *New York Times*, 28 June 1950, 40; "Window Display Studied: NYU Survey Shows Audience 30% Men and 70% Women," *New York Times*, 19 December 1949, 34; "Windows Displays Tested in Survey: Raised Type is Found 'Traffic Stopper' of 3 Kinds Tried, Association Group Hears," *New York Times*, 9 December 1948, 54; "NYU to Study Displays: Measure of Consumer Reaction if Objective of Program," *New York Times*, 2 August 1948, 24.

<sup>278</sup> Howard M. Cowee, *National Association of Display Industries Visual Merchandising Research Series Report No. 1 The Pilot Study of Display*, (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1949), 1.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, iii.



thus combined the early notions of retail science with the artistic vision of display directors; it suggested a larger, research and metric-driven ability to organize retail interiors with the goal of increasing sales and profits.

The National Association of Display Industries provided Cowee with a research grant to support the report with the idea that it would “be studied by top retail store managements, by marketing research organizations, and by schools of retailing, commerce, or business.”<sup>280</sup> The NADI sought to use research and evidence to support untested industry claims that better product displays resulted in more sales. Using onsite observation, the study determined the number of “lookers” and “stoppers” for each display—people who simply looked at the display as they passed by and those who stopped walking to look more closely. Cowee suggested that as the number of lookers increased, so too did the number of stoppers. The higher the number of stoppers, the more successful the study rated a display, because only stoppers carried the potential to become buyers. The baseline display, or the merchandise simply draped on a table or a counter, served as the control which researchers compared to two other types of display using the same merchandise: one showing it raised on a fixture, and the other showing merchandise in use, either through a mannequin or a vignette. In one lingerie example that displayed items on a mannequin, a slip attracted twice the number of lookers than it did when draped on the counter. The study argued that the findings proved “the vital importance of ensuring the ability of a display technique to increase the number of lookers, because in *all* tests—seven of every ten times—as the number of lookers increased, the number of stoppers also increased.”<sup>281</sup>

---

<sup>280</sup> Ibid., iii.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 46.

[italics in the original] Through using numerical data and a scientific mode of presentation, the claims of the display industry shifted from guesswork to researched facts.

Cowee argued that the “the function of display is to *exploit* people at the point of sale.”<sup>282</sup> [italics in the original] He further explained this connection: “[F]or all people, regardless of the exclusive or overlapping circulation of the various media, display helps to make the goods easy to locate, easy to identify, and easy to appraise. Display, moreover, presents for sale *additional* goods that are unpublicized in any other way. *It is the display and the sale of additional, unadvertised goods that makes possible and profitable the use of each publicity medium.*”<sup>283</sup> [italics in the original]

In 1950 NADI published a follow-up report with new national research, again authored by Cowee, titled *The Traffic-Readership and Sales Study of Display*. In this second report, Cowee further emphasized the ideas of “visual merchandising” and the possibilities that proper use of display could increase sales. In the first study, Cowee suggested the possibility of more sales through increased “lookers” and “stoppers” and offered a hierarchy of display methods; in the second study, he explored the impact of proper displays more in-depth and defined the concept of “visual merchandising” as “the medium of sales promotion that appeals to the eyes of the people passing store-window and interior displays.”<sup>284</sup> The objective was simple: “to speed the sale of more

---

<sup>282</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

<sup>284</sup> Cowee, *The Traffic-Readership and Sales Study of Display* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1950), x.

goods to more people and to reduce selling costs.”<sup>285</sup> The special attention given to the term suggests its growth as a concept within the retail trade; in 1947 the Department of Commerce lumped “visual merchandising” into a list of synonyms for open display, but, by 1950, “visual merchandising” became a method for creating points of sale throughout the store using an empirically researched arrangement of merchandise. The rapid acceptance and implementation of the term reflects the evolving thinking of merchants in their considerations of interior display. Much more powerful than purely aesthetic display, visual merchandising carried connotations not just of art and design, but also of social scientific research methods.

Cowee intended to understand if and how displays increased sales. While his first study concluded that better displays led to more “stoppers,” the second report argued that the better displays also increased sales. For window displays, the report monitored the sale of the merchandise on view before, during, and immediately after the window came down. The results overwhelmingly suggested that window displays increased the sale of specific merchandise during and immediately after its inclusion within a store window. Providing an analysis of the impact of window displays at twelve department stores, the study offered an examination of interior displays at three separate establishments. The relatively small sample did not stop Cowee from concluding that displays following the guidelines from the first report sold more merchandise than those ignoring them. He stressed an example using a display for razor banks—a canister for safe, home disposal of used razor blades—that showed a seventy-four percent increase in sales using the new techniques as compared to the

---

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

original display. The original display contained a small sign with a number of razor banks on the counter while the improved approach showed a large sign with a hand depositing a used razor in a bank. As the first report suggested that displays showing merchandise in-use created more stoppers, Cowee subsequently argued that the upgraded displays also meant more sales.<sup>286</sup> While interior display initially appeared an afterthought to window display, the report's goal of raising awareness of its effectiveness in department stores was successful.

In the 1950s, interior display developed into an independent department, distinct from other behind-the-scenes areas of stores. Research-based studies from the 1940s fueled a larger discussion about the power and importance of visual merchandising. While urban stores continued to maintain highly theatrical show windows, exterior windows largely faded away in the mid-century suburban landscape. Interior display became the overarching visual department in retail stores. In 1952, Kretschmer, author of *Window and Interior Display*, posited that display directors should focus on interiors as much as windows: "The sales value of interior displays must not be discounted. It is one way that merchandise not being currently shown in the windows can come in for its share of customer attention."<sup>287</sup> By the 1960s, retailers viewed visual merchandising as instrumental to increased selling and realized that fixtures played a vital role in shaping that development.

Most retailers and trade organizations agreed that interior display had become a necessary technique in merchandising; yet, even by the late 1950s, leaders still

---

<sup>286</sup> Ibid.,115.

<sup>287</sup> Kretschmer, 68-69.

struggled to define the rules and regulations regarding best practice. Part of the problem lay in the difficulties of establishing a new role for display departments. *Women's Wear Daily* broached the subject with the article “Store Buyers Don’t Know How to Use Fixtures: Banks.” The article queried the thoughts of Louis Banks, formerly administrative assistant manager of the National Store Planning Division of Sears, Roebuck & Company and now running his own design firm, regarding fixtures and display. Banks identified the problem of display as a result of store buyers misunderstanding how to construct displays, suggesting a struggle for authority between them and designers. In the interview, Banks warned managers “against letting buyers control stores,” noting that “[b]uyers don’t know how much to put on a fixture—and what is the proper depth of selection by color, size, and style.”<sup>288</sup> Banks alludes to the presence of a larger issue that plagued mid-century department stores: untrained managers or buyers created lackluster displays. Just as stores in the early part of the century developed window trimming as a skilled trade, mid-century stores sought to create new departments that included trained personnel skilled at heightening the quality of design and power of in-store display.

By the 1950s and into the 1960s, trade writing spent less time justifying the importance of display and more space illustrating how to use design to sell. The emergence of numerous textbooks on the mechanics of department store operations, some focused entirely on display and merchandising, demonstrated the elevation from

---

<sup>288</sup> Jack Robertson, “Store Buyers Don’t Know How To Use Fixtures,” *Women's Wear Daily* 95, no. 11 (16 July 1957): 18.

trial-and-error selling to scientifically guided principles to encourage sales.<sup>289</sup>

Textbooks dissected every part of the workings of stores, from personnel tasks to merchandise departments and building use, linking each aspect of operations to the quest for profits. These studies provided students with a clear guide for creating an efficient machine for selling. These new guidelines advocated that proper merchandising and directed display could go beyond simply “stopping” customers; combined well, they could encourage more sales through impulse buying.

Tracing the development of interior display and fixture advice during the first half of the twentieth century identifies the agents of change and the shift towards a defined, professional field of “visual merchandising.” During the first two decades of the twentieth century, guidance on selling was largely divided between how to *sell* goods (the job of a trained salesperson and later the role of fixtures) and how to *show* goods (the job of window trimmers and display men). While the latter intended to

---

<sup>289</sup> Trade associations, government organizations, and individual experts published instructional books. A sampling of the books includes: Kretschmer, *Window and Interior Display*; Delbert Duncan and Charles F. Phillips, *Retailing Principles and Methods* (Homewood, IL: R.D. Irwin, 1955); *Display Manual: National Retail Dry Goods Association, Visual Merchandising Group* (NRMA: New York, 1951); John Williams Wingate and Elmer O Schaller, *Techniques of Retail Merchandising* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1956); Howard Claude Murrills, *The New Practical Display Instructor* (London: Blandford Press, 1954); Allan Plowman, *Fashion Display Illustrated* (London: Blandford Prod, 1957); National Retail Merchants Association, *Display Manual* (NRDA Visual Merchandising Group: New York, 1955); Edwin Leonard Nelson, *Teacher's Manual for Merchandising Display* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1954); Juvenal L. Angel, *Careers in Merchandising* (New York: World Trade Academy Press, 1958); Jim Buckley, *The Drama of Display: Visual Merchandising and Its Techniques* (New York: Pellegrini & Cuhady, 1953); Virginia Department of Education, *Visual Merchandising: Display Techniques, Interior Display and Window Display* (Richmond: Distributive Education Service, 1956).

encourage selling, it was the development of the concept of “visual merchandising” in the postwar era that expressly linked display to increased sales, using metrics and research. Rather than simply imbue merchandise with “desirable” qualities by surrounding it with colors and materials that implied elegance and that used the notion of spectacle to distract shoppers, visual merchandising invited display men to feature objects and place them in strategic locations to encourage impulse buying.

Developments in the definition of display mirrored shifts in who was providing advice to retailers. In the early part of the century, advice on interiors largely came from fixture companies themselves. While trade publications also offered guidance on window display, their discussions of interior display merely mimicked the empty advice disseminated by fixture companies. This instruction centered on broad claims that new fixtures could “increase profits” without offering much detail beyond how and where to purchase them. As window trimmers and trained professionals began to establish interior display departments in the 1920s, advice regarding interior display started to come less from companies selling tools for display and more from directors of display who managed interior display in department stores; they became the agents of change ushering in a new era of display techniques. By 1950, textbooks written by display professionals, research studies, and trade journals all attempted to create guidelines on *how* to create successful displays. The professionalization of the field of interior display culminated with the conceptualization of “visual merchandising.” Armed with terminology and backed by scientific research, interior display professionals concretely established their field independent from window display and created academic programs to train the next generation of designers.

The story of professionalization of interior display informs the larger study of department store design. As designers created more modern spaces for department stores in the 1930s and again in the postwar era, the development of visual merchandising revealed underlying ideas in the ways in which designers and store executives planned layouts, fixtures, and display. From “modernization” programs to updated store interiors in the 1940s, to large suburban shopping center developments in the 1960s, the evolution of interior display parallels the professionalization of the field. The study of department store interiors and of the designers who created them, as documented in the previous chapters, illustrates the effects of the professionalization of the field of visual merchandising.



## Chapter 5

### “IMAGE BUILDING” IN THE SHOPPING CENTER, THE 1960s

Dichter noted in in 1968 that interior display contributed to “image-building” and “image maintenance.” He explained that “[w]hile displays are designed largely to trigger purchases at the point of sale, they can (and should) contribute to the important jobs of image-building and image-maintenance as well.”<sup>290</sup> Dichter had articulated the “personality” phenomenon of the 1950s, and he later suggested that display methods and interior design informed larger concepts, such as branding and corporate image. As large suburban shopping centers developed in the 1960s, “image-building” and corporate identity, or branding, became an important way for stores to define corporate values and connect with consumers. The visual look of the store informed not only a store’s “personality;” it also shaped the ways in which consumers formed opinions about that store. With new retail landscapes juxtaposing a mix of tenants, the ways in which stores used display to define themselves shifted in the mid-1960s. Both upscale department stores and more budget-conscious retail establishments were housed under one roof. The evolution of the shopping mall illustrates how stores began to both embrace similar methods of display while attempting to distinguish their identity through visual design.

---

<sup>290</sup> Ernest Dichter, “Proposal for a Motivational Research Study of Display,” July 1968, Ernest Dichter papers (Accession 2407), Box 170, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

As business historians John Saunders and T.C. Melewar explain, corporate identity is “more complicated than ‘just design,’ corporate identity embraces all the facets of an organization that influence the way people see and think about them.”<sup>291</sup> Studies of corporate identity often link branding and visual design as the core components of the development of corporate identity in the mid-twentieth century; however, the physical design of commercial space should not be ignored because it was a key aspect of that development.<sup>292</sup> In the 1960s, industrial and graphic designers began to develop standards for corporate visual identity through logos, color selection, typeface, and slogans. Frederick Henrion and Alan Parkin, in their 1967 book *Design Coordination and Corporate Image*, articulated the “Corporate Visual Identity System,” or CVIS, as set of standardized graphic design elements used to build a “visual identity.”<sup>293</sup> They asserted that this visual identity communicated corporate values and philosophy. In 1989, Andrew Lambert, Director of Wolf Olins, an international brand consultancy firm, wrote about the importance of architecture and interior design in constructing corporate identity. He identified structure as part of a

---

<sup>291</sup> T.C. Melewar and John Saunders, “Global Corporate Visual Identity Systems: Using an Extended Marketing Mix,” *European Journal of Marketing* 34.5, no. 6 (2000): 538.

<sup>292</sup> Discussions of corporate identity are usually by practicing designers and focus on graphic design elements or how to construct a corporate identity or image. For a historiographical discussion see Sue Westcott Alessandri, “Modeling Corporate Identity: A Concept Explication and Theoretical Explanation,” *Corporate Communications* 6, no. 4 (2001): 173-182, <http://0-search.proquest.com.ignacio.usfca.edu/docview/214190254?accountid=14674>.

<sup>293</sup> Frederick Henrion and Alan Parkin articulated this in their 1967 book *Design Coordination and Corporate Image* (London: Studio Vista, 1967).

company's total visual identity.<sup>294</sup> While notions of visual identity were fully formed in 1989, it is possible to look back in time at the architecture and interiors of department stores located in suburban shopping centers in the 1960s to see the fledgling notions of interior space as a marker of corporate identity. While interior design and identity was not then a fully formed concept, corporations used architecture as a means to establish corporate identity as early as the 1930s. For example, Texaco (The Texas Company) hired Walter Dorwin Teague to design a standard look for gas stations across the nation in 1934. The company implemented Teague's design in 10,000 stations.<sup>295</sup> The importance of corporate identity on a smaller, regional scale within department stores suggests that changes in the 1960s prompted the emergence of new ideas of branding. This chapter will use the NorthPark Shopping Center in Dallas, Texas, which opened in 1965, to illustrate how a high-end store, Neiman Marcus, and an economy department store, The J.C. Penney Company, both employed national department store trends to attract the general audience of the shopping mall, while simultaneously using display and interior design to carve a distinct corporate image.

### **Differences in Display: Upscale and Mid-Level Department Stores**

In order to understand the shifts that took place in the mid-1960s, it is necessary to historicize the evolution of the differences in display in upscale and mid-level department stores. In the 1940s and 1950s (and still lingering in the 1960s), two

---

<sup>294</sup> Andrew Lambert, "Corporate Identity and Facilities Management," *Facilities*, 7, no. 12 (1989): 7 – 12.

<sup>295</sup> John Jackle and Keith Sculle, *The Gas Station in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 146.

different approaches to display existed that helped define class status in retailing more generally. The first system of display, popular in upscale stores, such as Neiman Marcus, Bergdorf Goodman and Saks Fifth Avenue, or in the higher cost departments of typical stores, harkened back to full-service stores and maintained the need for the assistance of sales personnel in selecting and buying merchandise. The second mode of display, self-service fixtures, popularized by Loewy and Snaith interiors and endorsed by much of the mid-century trade literature as previously discussed, became a crucial feature of the everyman's store, such as Gimbels and Bloomingdales.

First, this chapter will explore display in high-end department stores. The S. S. Silver Company Archive in the collection of the New York Historical Society Museum and Library reveals how one design firm perpetuated the idea that upscale department stores should maintain closed-stock interiors. S.S. Silver, a fixture company with full-service interior design capabilities, operated from the 1920s into the 1950s. While the firm also designed residential interiors and office space, retail spaces made up the bulk of the company's work. The full service firm managed the entire interior design including layout, lighting, and fixtures. With a long client list—including Bergdorf Goodman, Bernhard Ulmann, Kaufman's, S. M. Frank & Company, Saks Fifth Avenue, and Woolf Brothers—S.S. Silver and Company defined upscale retail interiors in the mid-century. The interiors designed by The S.S. Silver and Company upheld classic, elegant department store atmospheres and presented a mode of interior design that was lavish compared to department stores designed by Loewy and Snaith. The S.S. Silver and Company designed interiors for Saks Fifth Avenue and Bergdorf Goodman, two stores known for their luxury trade. The

company created dramatic and elegant interiors with closed stock and fixtures that largely discouraged self-selection, very similar to Bullocks-Wilshire's 1929 interiors.

In the late 1940s, S.S. Silver completed interior designs for Saks Fifth Avenue in Detroit, Michigan and Beverly Hills, California. While each store had a distinct personality, they both employed similar fixtures and systems of display. A photograph of the men's department in Detroit shows how the design allowed for very limited self-selection. With dress shirts piled in glass cases and glass enclosed shelves, finding a shirt without significant sales help would be an impossible task. The design only allowed customers to browse a rack of ties without assistance.

The S.S. Silver and Company also preserved more classic and European design elements than those used in contemporary interiors at mid-level retailers, such as Gimbels and Bloomingdales. In the men's department, the stylized dentil carving on the cases and shelving units behind depicted in the image reflects neoclassical architecture. A French chair rests in the foreground. A photograph of the women's department in the Detroit store shows similar design elements. Both Neoclassical and Rococo architectural elements frame the walls, ceilings, and cases. Crystal scones flank each side of the wall case. Delicate French inspired wallpaper and an Empire style chair further determine the classic styling of the room. The decorative features in both of these spaces were quite different from the mid-century modern styling evident in Raymond Loewy Associates' designs, which employed new materials and stripped architecture and fixtures of ornamentation. The designs of the S.S. Silver and Company looked to the past to create more traditional spaces, which suggests that upscale department stores initially resisted a very modern approach to fixtures and display.

The S.S. Silver design for Saks Fifth Avenue's Beverly Hills location includes a traditional interior that is similar to the Detroit store. Photographs of the men's hat and suit departments show American Colonial styling, evident in heavy woodwork and architectural features; these give the rooms an elegant and stately feel. The departments, while slightly different in design, resemble the Detroit location and share the same merchandise display system. The design controlled objects for sale and forced clients to ask for help to see and handle merchandise. The men's hat department illustrates the use of closed-stock display. While the majority of stock was visible, the cases restricted access to merchandise. Glass cases and glass covered display shelves kept customers from handling hats without assistance, an important barrier in stores with more expensive merchandise. A photograph of the men's suit department shows a similar layout that required shoppers to receive help from sales personnel. While fixtures appear to indicate popular trends of open shelving by hanging blazers within view, the setup was not intended for self-service; glass cases enclosed the hanging fixtures, deterring customers from helping themselves. S.S. Silver designers placed the enclosed unit directly in front of the wall display, which created a physical barrier and acted like a counter, further discouraging self-selection. While customers could easily slide behind the case and peruse suits, the large glass case functioned as way to ensure shoppers received help when making selections.

Surprisingly, at least one observer aligned S.S. Silver designs with "modernization" which suggests the importance of engaging in contemporary terminology, but also the confusion surrounding its definition. In 1956, *The Boot and Shoes Recorder: National Voice of the Trade* published an image of the S. S. Silver design for the Delman Shoe Salon in New York City with the caption "Modernization

Means Progress.”<sup>296</sup> An image of the shoe salon, which used historic architecture as decoration, shows a space quite different than the retail shops designed by Loewy and even than the updated interiors at Neiman Marcus by Le Maire. With high ceilings and neoclassical architecture, the shoe salon evokes the feel of a European palace rather than a retail shop. The sales floor contains almost no merchandise, except for two closed glass cases showing no more than ten pairs of shoes. While this image represents a boutique shoe salon and not a department store, the treatment of the retail space is important, as it helps illustrate S.S. Silver’s guiding principles in retail design. For S.S. Silver “modernization” meant new spaces; they gave their clients new versions of traditional store interiors. In 1954, *Display World* covered S.S. Silver’s design for Bergdorf Goodman with a headline reading “New Décor, Same Store Personality,” which illustrated the importance of preserving the old store image.<sup>297</sup>

The S.S. Silver and Company designs engage with the idea of store image. Combining an eclectic array of decorative features, the interior designs distinguish the spaces from mid-level department stores. The photographs of the S.S. Silver and Company designs suggest early notions of image building through department store interiors similar to “personality” in early branch locations. Rather than focusing on

---

<sup>296</sup> Clipping, *The Book and Shoe Recorder*, 1 December 1956, S.S. Silver and Company Publicity and Correspondence, PR 61, S.S. Silver and Company Archive 1922 - 1957, New York Historical Society, New York, NY.

<sup>297</sup> Clipping, Jerome V. Meckler, “New Décor, Same Store Personality,” *Display World*, May 1954, S.S. Silver and Company Publicity and Correspondence, PR 61, S.S. Silver and Company Archive 1922 - 1957, New York Historical Society, New York, NY.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*

defining a store's brand, the company was concerned about appropriately fulfilling the expectations of shoppers patronizing the store. Additionally, by creating an elevated look, the interiors helped stores such as Saks Fifth Avenue cater to their discerning clientele and offer unparalleled customer service. With small luxurious touches and a combination of modern and historic elements, the Saks Fifth Avenue interiors aligned much more closely with the broader expectations of upscale department stores at a time when shoppers traveled specifically to these locations.

Other upscale stores struggled to find a balance between “modernization” and company image. The discourse between Stanley Marcus and Le Maire reveals how Neiman Marcus struggled with newer retail concepts. In 1951, Stanley Marcus considered some of the downfalls of closed stock displays. He wrote to Le Maire as she worked on the downtown store's new design, “One of the weaknesses of most shoe departments and of our own millinery department is that you don't see any merchandise.”<sup>298</sup> Marcus's sentiments on showcasing the merchandise for sale reflect the beginnings of his interest in more modern methods of store design. Neiman Marcus, however, like Saks and Bergdorf Goodman, proved a bit slow in accepting modern merchandising methods. In 1953, Le Maire wrote to Stanley Marcus regarding a trade report on new methods of self-selection in merchandising. She offered her opinion stating, “I believe in exposed stock and display or as I have always preferred to call it, ‘presentation of merchandise’ as being tremendously important. We are not

---

<sup>298</sup> Letter from Stanley Marcus to Eleanor Le Maire, 30 March 1951, Stanley Marcus Collection (Collection A93.1869), Box 58, Folder 21, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.



dealing here, however, with a general point of view, but with Neiman Marcus.”<sup>299</sup> Le Maire described open stock as inappropriate for Neiman Marcus’s image. Her sentiments as lead designer aligned with Marcus’ own thoughts on the company’s position, and Neiman Marcus resisted the modern styling popularized by Loewy and Snaith.

Marcus and Le Maire received feedback from other display managers within the company who encouraged more modern retail methods. In 1956, Neiman Marcus employees sent a report to Le Maire to guide her in designing the first floor fixtures for the downtown store. The report included advice from Thelma Malloy, who directed the store’s display, and various department managers and buyers. Some asked for cases similar to the “old ones;” others requested better lighting and different layouts to improve walking patterns. The most drastic requests were for fixtures that aided in self-selection. The women’s sportswear department solicited more planned space for folded stock in addition to a specific fixture “open to the customer” with shelves on the back side for reserve stock.<sup>300</sup> The manager of the neckwear and scarves department also requested self-service cases indicating that they “could be a hanging type of case, counter height with both sides open.”<sup>301</sup> He referred to appealing cases he had seen at Bonwit Teller that “permitted a customer to pick out a neckpiece

---

<sup>299</sup> Letter from Eleanor Le Maire to Stanley Marcus, 15 April 1953, Stanley Marcus Collection (Collection A93.1869), Box 257, Folder 2 , , DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.

<sup>300</sup> “Suggested Fixtures, First Floor,” Report prepared for Eleanor Le Maire, 17 February 1956, Stanley Marcus Collection (Collection A93.1869), Box 257, Folder 2, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid.

on a hanger and examine it, and it was a great factor in interesting people in merchandise of this kind.”<sup>302</sup> This reference to Bonwit Teller suggests that buyers and managers looked to other department stores for ideas and advice on display.

### **From Small-Town Store to National Retailer: The J.C. Penney Company**

Higher-end stores such as Saks and Neiman Marcus resisted new modes of self-selection likely as a means of providing elevated customer service to devoted shoppers. However, even some mid-level stores such as The J.C. Penney Company, were also slow to adapt modern merchandising changes. The changing design trends at J.C. Penney in the 1950s and 1960s suggest that the idea of store personality morphed into a larger defining feature of branding that included a store’s ability to fit into a stereotypical, suburban, American environment. The national design changes that occurred at J.C. Penney illustrated how the company adopted an almost universal look—or personality—for their stores that reflected their intention to connect with suburban America.

Until the late 1950s, J.C. Penney adopted a more conservative approach to design in hopes of maintaining the store’s budget conscious and small town identity. J.C. Penney began as a small-town dry goods store famous for a no-frills method of retailing. Opened in 1902 by James Cash Penney in the small mining town of Kemmerer, Wyoming, the original store, called The Golden Rule, aimed to provide value and low prices to the surrounding community. As the company expanded to small towns across the nation, it became a staple of main streets in America by selling “practical clothing for the family, work clothes, shoes, notions, piece goods, and a

---

<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

relatively small amount of housewares.”<sup>303</sup> Defined by terms such as “practical” and “value,” the company’s reputation and their locations in downtown areas pushed the store towards obsolescence in the postwar era.<sup>304</sup>

In the first half of the twentieth century, J.C. Penney built many of its stores with a similar floor plan—a one and a half story, loft style space with bins of merchandise and heavy fixtures. Two photographs from the 1920s that depict the Waynesboro, New Jersey store exemplify the look of the J.C. Penney operations in this early period. The unassuming exterior fits into the small- town main street setting. An interior photograph taken from the staircase to the upper level shows the lower sales floor, a long and narrow space filled with dark fixtures and little room to move around. Merchandise is piled up or tossed in bins with reserve stock in boxes stacked behind the counter. Light enters from the front windows, and hanging lamps create ambient lighting throughout the rest of the space. Each store catered to its local, downtown shopping district and attempted to stock as much merchandise as possible in the small space. The economy atmosphere of the store included a few self-service

---

<sup>303</sup> John McDonald, “How They Minted the New Penney,” *Fortune*, July 1967. Reprinted for the employees of J.C. Penney Company, Inc., 2.

<sup>304</sup> The J.C. Penney Papers at the DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, is a rich archive that contains the company’s corporate papers. While the Stanley Marcus Collection provides the story of individuals, the J.C. Penney Papers focus on corporate identity and lack personal correspondence related to design. The papers themselves mirror the Penney Company’s overarching corporate identity in the mid-century. While other stores introduced influential characters such as Loewy and Le Maire in press releases and marketing, the Penney Company largely relied on the corporate brand to define itself. Throughout this research I have attempted to humanize the discourse as much as possible, but remain limited by sources that uphold Penney’s goal of uniform corporate identity.

fixtures, which may have aided in the creation of the initial negative stigma towards self-service.

After World War II, the Penney Company's first attempts at modernization were sparked by necessity as opposed to a desire to keep current with trends. As the 1947 Annual Report noted, Penny's always "followed a conservative program of expansion or alteration."<sup>305</sup> Even after the war, they continued to be "conservative" with renovations so that in "practically all cases, these changes have been made because the Company was obligated to make these improvements on account of existing leases or contracts."<sup>306</sup> While the executives desired more "modern and attractive facilities for convenient shopping," they considered that spending money on those improvements was inconsistent with "good judgment" and fiscal responsibility: "At a time when both materials and labor are so scarce and inflation is more or less rampant, we believe that retailers can serve the public interest, as well as their own security, by deferring new building."<sup>307</sup> While other stores such as Neiman Marcus, Foley's, and Gimbels considered modernization efforts an important factor in store growth, J.C. Penney hesitated to engage right away.

The store's obsolete interior spaces illustrated Penney's initial inability to shift its image and keep up with retail trends. A photograph of the Johnstown, Pennsylvania store from 1952 illustrates the company's slow reaction to the national changes in

---

<sup>305</sup> J.C. Penney Company Annual Report, 31 December 1947. J.C. Penney Papers (A2004.0006), Box 317, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, 3.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid.

department store design. The store shared the Waynesboro store's classic floor plan. Small, cramped, and dark, the store had a limited assortment of merchandise, restricted to soft goods. The dark, checkered linoleum floor, hanging lighting pendants, and crammed merchandise made the Johnstown store interior seem frozen in time, aligning much more closely with the Waynesboro, New Jersey interior from the 1920s than with the new retail spaces that graced the press at the same moment. The store even contains the same lighting fixtures as the Waynesboro location and a ceiling fan to circulate air suggests the absence of air conditioning. The Johnstown interior, however, appears to recognize at least a few new retail trends in regards to lighting, floor plan, and self selection. The interior is a little more organized as fixtures neatly contain merchandise and excess stock. Clear aisles run down the center of the floor plan and lighting along the wall displays highlights merchandise. While the fixtures lack the modern edge found in Loewy's designs, the interior demonstrates the company's conservative approach to remodeling discussed in the 1947 annual report. Ultimately the interior reflects the company's image as a modest store with low-priced goods for small-town dwellers.

In the 1950s, the Penney Company shifted from their earlier conservative approach and began to update a number of stores. In the 1950s and 1960s, the company's annual reports kept stockholders abreast of the "modernization program."<sup>308</sup> The 1956 annual report noted that during the previous ten years, the company "expanded or improved" at least two-thirds of the existing J.C. Penney

---

<sup>308</sup> J.C. Penney, Annual Report, 1958. The J.C. Penney Papers (A2004.0006), Box 317, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.

stores.<sup>309</sup> While other retailers significantly altered the look and feel of their stores, J.C. Penney's first decade of modernization focused on easy updates, primarily façades and fixture styles within the existing stores. Two images of the same J.C. Penney store from Greenville, Pennsylvania, illustrate how the company began to update its image through design. The first image from 1940 shows a small store in an early twentieth-century Main Street building with carved dentils and corbels adorning the roofline. The brick front and second floor windows, paired with the architectural details, clearly demarcate the building as a turn-of-the-twentieth-century building. The remodeled storefront, as shown in a photograph taken in 1961, displays an attempt to create a more modern look. Large, flat stone blocks cover the brick façade to create a less adorned, more geometric look. Simple, rectangular windows have replaced the old, long and thin ones, and the building boasts an updated company logo. Perhaps slightly behind the times, the company appeared to follow the 1930s modernization trends that focused on façade updates.

Beginning in the 1950s, Penney stores across the country seriously explored modern merchandising trends to stay current and competitive. Under the direction of President William Batten, the Penney Company changed. Penneys' future direction became clear in 1954 when Batten gave his now famous address, "The Next Fifty Years," at the company's spring conventions. In a discussion of the past and future potential for the chain, Batten addressed key concerns such as market growth, suburbanization, improving and expanding stores, understanding buying power, and positioning Penneys to maintain a competitive edge. He stressed that unlike many

---

<sup>309</sup> J.C. Penney, Annual Report, 1956. The J.C. Penney Papers (A2004.0006, Box 317, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University).

other department store chains, the majority of the company's stores existed in small towns, a testament to their past. While small town stores defined the J.C. Penney company profile, like all other retailers, the company understood the effects of suburbanization. In his speech, Batten noted that Nassau County, with just one J.C. Penney store, had more buying power than twenty states, a figure that included Colorado, which had twenty stores and twenty-eight million dollars in sales volume.<sup>310</sup> The power of Nassau County, a suburb of New York City, illustrated the importance of suburban shopping and prompted company executives to consider changes in their future sales approach.

Batten called for the chain to branch out from its roots because the national landscape no longer needed a "small town store."<sup>311</sup> He also suggested the importance of merchandising and appearance, noting that while eighty-seven locations had been updated since 1947, "there is still a great potential for future growth in present stores that need additional space and a new look."<sup>312</sup> Even with all the improvements, Batten shared a competitor's evaluation of the store and suggested that J.C. Penney could address the concerns by addressing "wasted space and tables that lack selling interest. In other words, weak point-of-sale presentation. One of the remarks most commonly heard in our Company is that we're too crowded, that we're short of space."<sup>313</sup> Batten called for "better presentation" of merchandise, noting that J.C. Penney's overall

---

<sup>310</sup> William Batten, "The Next Fifty Years," address given at the Penney Company's spring conventions, February-March 1954. J.C. Penney Papers (A2004.0006), Box 21, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, 5.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid., 14.

appearance fell far behind competitors, a thought clearly demonstrated by the photograph of the Johnstown store interior. While other stores modernized, the company lagged behind. Batten insisted on a renewed interest in the look and feel of the stores, from “better sales planning” to “better training;” he claimed that “‘simplified selling’ demands a better all-over job—better sales planning, better buying, better presentation and better training of our associates.”<sup>314</sup>

In a 1957 company memo, Batten reiterated his sentiments while continuing to stress the importance of the company’s visual ethos. He noted the major changes in the company’s customer base, which demanded a new atmosphere. Once the home of restricted income shoppers at a small-town store, J.C. Penney now targeted a new type of shopper, part of a larger population and a mass market—middle-income consumers with more discretionary buying-power. Crediting the growth of the suburbs with creating the new target shoppers, he explained that they demanded higher priced items and expected consumer credit. Batten argued that this new customer needed to be attracted to J.C. Penney stores, and he believed that store appearance would be the lynchpin in enticing them to shop there. He wrote, “At this particular time the need for a clear definition of our merchandising character is vital.”<sup>315</sup> While the merchandise itself played a role in this definition, the layout and design of the store bolstered performance. In fact, Batten identified “facilities atmosphere,” or “fixtures, layout, decorating,” as the number one “kind of services to be offered to attract this customer

---

<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 14-15.

<sup>315</sup> Memo by William Batten, “Company Character, Long-Range Planning and Company Policies, 8/1/1957,” J.C. Penney Papers (A2004.0006), Box 19, Folder 10, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, 3.



and support merchandise offerings.”<sup>316</sup> Followed by atmosphere, conveniences such as consumer credit, layaway, parking, returns, and alterations—all services connected with suburban department stores—made the list. In short, the personality of J.C. Penney shifted to better reflect the community it served—suburban America. J.C. Penney was late in the game, as compared to Gimbels, Foley’s, or Neiman Marcus; however, the company had the advantage of seeing how competitors had handled modernization. In 1957, J.C. Penney had the ability to review how rival department stores had designed suburban retail establishments during the 1950s. The store could essentially start from scratch and capitalize on the idea of personality by designing for and selling to a specific customer group within a relatively homogeneous suburban community—something at which the company’s history suggested it would excel.

How did the company articulate the changes in atmosphere and layout? The personality of J.C. Penney retrofitted itself to reflect its new constituency of American suburbanites. Much like modern stores designed by Loewy and Le Maire, J.C. Penney executives looked to align the store with the ideas of contemporary department stores. The company’s turmoil about how to address the new consumer base and their altered expectations for store design informed many corporate discourses that followed Batten’s addresses. By 1959, J.C. Penney executives detailed how the store was going to keep up with competitors, sharing the corporate plan at the company’s annual meeting. A presentation on the store’s new direction called for “clean, orderly, inviting” stores “designed to be attractive and functional, without frills or luxury appointments, decoration, or lavish fixtures.”<sup>317</sup> The presentation synopsis general

---

<sup>316</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>317</sup> “The Penny Company” presentation at company meetings in February

mid-level department store trends including the paring down of lavish interiors for modern elegance and function, or “The Raymond Loewy Success Course,” as Gimbels called it in 1949.<sup>318</sup>

While J.C. Penney may have been slow to join the modernization trend, once the company decided to take part, it quickly helped to spread modernized retail facilities to small towns across the country. In 1964, an article in *Business Week* highlighted the company’s success under Batten’s leadership summarizing his 1957 company memo. The article referred to it as “the memo that moved a mountain,” and discussed its effect on Penneys’ new company plan. Identifying 1964 as the company’s most successful year to date, *Business Week* noted that J.C. Penney expected sales to exceed \$2 billion as compared to \$1.8 billion the year before. Batten credited the store’s success in part to the expansion of merchandise selection to include appliances and hard goods—essentially becoming a mid-century department store and not just a soft goods retailer. Other factors contributing to growth included opening the suburban locations, adding credit, and increasing services to stores, such as computer systems to track orders and merchandise. The physical space also reflected a new model of change and growth. While in 1961 the typical J.C. Penney store was just twenty-three thousand square feet, new company stores in suburban centers averaged one hundred twenty-five thousand square feet.<sup>319</sup>

---

1959, J.C. Penney Papers (A2004.0006), Box 21, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.

<sup>318</sup> Advertisement, New York Herald Tribune, 11 December 1950.

<sup>319</sup> “The Memo that Moved a Mountain,” *Business Week*, 12 December 1964, 74.

As the 1960s progressed, stores became even larger and developed more character and personality to reflect the new Penney Company corporate image. Lewis A. Kagel, director of the Store Development Division, shared his thoughts on the store's changes in a 1968 interview entitled "A New Image for a New Penneys." He noted that prior to the "merchandising transformation," while the store was "durable" and "honest" with "good quality at fair prices," it was also: "Dull. Unimaginative. Not quite 'with it,' in some areas."<sup>320</sup> Consequently, Kagel expressed that the store had failed to captivate the "young marrieds" market. Kagel revealed that improving the company's merchandise was not enough to alter the negative associations with the store; changes in the company's "physical character" were also necessary. Kagel linked the visual appearance and selection of merchandise with a larger goal of catering to one's community—creating a personality within the store. He stated, "Once you have produced a new taste level in the things you have to sell and in your method of presentation, you get to a wonderful new challenge; one of developing ideas and atmospheres to reflect a character consistent with your merchandising goals in a market."<sup>321</sup> The interview revealed that J.C. Penney closely considered their role of reflecting a character—in other words, a personality—within communities.

The introduction of Lewis Kagel to the Penney story is important to the historian. Though his title suggests that he played an essential role in the transformation of The Penney Company in the mid-century, he is an absent figure in

---

<sup>320</sup> "A New Image for A New Penneys," unidentified clipping, March 1968, J.C. Penney Papers (A2004.0006), Box 475, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, 1.

<sup>321</sup> Kagel in "A New Image for A New Penneys," 2.

the company archives. Kagel celebrated his thirtieth anniversary with Penneys in 1965. A veteran in the display industry, he studied fine arts at Columbia University before joining the “merchandise promotion and display” teams at Macy’s, Lord & Taylor, and the Lerner Shops in New York City.<sup>322</sup> Unlike press materials created by Neiman Marcus and Gimbels, which touted Le Maire and Loewy as key designers, the Penney Company did not publicize its designers; instead, it marketed the design itself. This decision of how to frame the store’s design speaks to Batten and Kagel’s goals of creating the “character” of Penneys, which was accomplished through the creation of an overarching corporate identity. While Bloomingdale’s, Neiman Marcus, and Gimbels attempted to achieve personality within their stores by creating a distinct atmosphere for local shoppers in the 1950s, the Penney Company took into account the identity of the entire chain, as evidenced by the ways in which Kagel and Batten generalized the national company as a singular entity in their discourse. Even the minimal press that mentioned Kagel’s work reiterates his silent role in forming the company’s corporate identity.<sup>323</sup> In December 1965, *Interiors Magazine* included Kagel as part of a profile on “Corporation Staff Designers.”<sup>324</sup> Even here Kagel is defined by his ability to represent a corporate identity through designing not stores, but rather “prototypes” with “the purpose of giving the interiors and the merchandise a

---

<sup>322</sup> “Corporation Staff Designers,” *Interiors*, December 1965, 99.

<sup>323</sup> Kagel only comes up three times in my research: “A New Image for Penneys;” “Corporation Staff Designers,” *Interiors*, December 1965, 85-100; and “Real Estate Reports on Prototype Store Image,” *Penney News* 31, no. 33 (March 1966): 3.

<sup>324</sup> “Corporation Staff Designers,” *Interiors*, December 1965, 99.

look which is identifiably J.C. Penney.”<sup>325</sup> The article noted that Kagel and his team of 13 were “not involved with specific stores.”<sup>326</sup> While Loewy and Le Maire worked with individual stores, creating specially designed environments, Kagel instead created interiors meant to represent the Penney Company as a whole and to communicate the new corporate identity.

Though it is difficult to identify how Kagel implemented his ideas, the new design direction under his leadership is evident in the changes that occurred in the 1960s. The newest Penny’s stores dominated suburban shopping centers and shared a similar visual identity. With their exteriors looking just as contemporary as the buildings around them, the large anchor stores redefined the J.C. Penney Company. As suburban shopping centers battled with each other to construct the largest, most convenient and modern shopping establishments, new shopping malls materialized throughout the American landscape. One shopping center, championed as a modern Mecca for shoppers and called The King of Prussia Shopping Center, opened in 1963. Located twenty miles from downtown Philadelphia, King of Prussia defined contemporary retail trends when it opened. The Penney store within it represents the beginnings of the company’s new path. A photograph of the new J.C. Penney building reveals an arcade façade that effortlessly transitions from the outside landscape to an indoor shopper’s paradise. Measuring over one hundred seventy-one thousand square feet, the large building was the store’s second full-line store and carried departments for men, women, and children, making shopping a family affair. A photograph of the

---

<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid.

main level interior illustrates the design's use of more modern elements. The image reveals how the open floor plan, without walls of tall cases dividing it, allows shoppers to have an expansive view of the sales floor. Fixtures appear to be arranged in grid fashion, creating aisles to direct the flow of traffic. Self-selection allows shoppers to browse and handle merchandise unassisted. The image shows at least fifty shoppers browsing and selecting merchandise without the help of sales clerks. Lighting creates a brightly illuminated space. The new interior shared nothing with the company's former small-town stores, and instead aligned more closely with the designs of The Raymond Loewy Associates.

The J.C. Penney Company's crusade to update hundreds of locations across the United States illustrated the breadth of the modern movement in retail merchandising trends. As a 1966 article in the J.C. Penney Company employee newsletter *Penney News* noted, "Store appearance has been shown to be one of the most important factors in attracting—and keeping—customers: outstanding merchandise demands equally outstanding surroundings."<sup>327</sup> Between 1947 and 1966, The Penney Company adopted and excelled in the new and modern standards issued by designers and rival department stores.

### **Together Under One Roof: The NorthPark Mall**

In the 1960s, a push for change in both upscale and more economical stores came from the development of unified shopping centers. As the Penney Company story illustrates, new suburban landscapes further informed how stores defined their

---

<sup>327</sup> "Real Estate Reports on Prototype Store Image," *Penney News* 31, no. 33, March 1966, 3.

brand with respect to others in the field. While on one hand, executives and designers began to develop store personalities to distinguish their stores from competitors, they simultaneously looked at others to ensure the creation of competitive environments. The covered shopping mall fueled competition between stores because it created one environment in which hundreds of stores existed. The community personalities that early suburban stores initially catered to became part of a larger suburban community that patronized the shopping mall. Within the mall, stores had to compete directly with other retailers, even if they each catered to different types of shoppers.

The NorthPark Regional Shopping Center in Dallas, Texas exemplifies how a new, unified environment influenced store design and display. Still a novel idea when it opened in 1965, NorthPark Center exemplifies how the shopping mall existed as a place where upscale, mid-level, and economical stores came together and competed for the same customer base; this trend influenced the designs within each store. One of the first malls in the country, NorthPark illustrates retail trends in a shopping center. The design of the shopping mall is credited to architect Victor Gruen (1903 – 1980). Gruen arrived in New York City in 1938 from Vienna, Austria and began his American career there designing specialty retail stores under the philosophy that lavish displays would increase sales. As he established his reputation as a successful retail designer, Gruen attracted city department stores as clients. In the postwar era, Gruen shifted his attention to the suburbs. He designed freestanding department stores with ample parking and amenities to captivate shoppers for hours on end.<sup>328</sup>

---

<sup>328</sup> For more discussion on Gruen, see Jeffrey Hartwick, *Mall Maker: Victor Gruen, Architect of an American Dream* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); Longstreth, *American Department Store*.

As Gruen watched suburbanization patterns develop, he designed open-air shopping centers that he believed defined modern convenience because they imitated downtown areas but offered ease of parking.<sup>329</sup> With no precedent to follow, through trial and error, Gruen created the standard that later influenced shopping mall design.<sup>330</sup> In 1956, Gruen's designed the first covered and enclosed shopping center in the country—the first mall. Southdale Shopping Center in Edna, Minnesota, a suburb of Minneapolis, opened and contributed to accelerating changes in postwar retail development. With seventy-two stores and over eight hundred thousand square feet of retail space, the covered shopping center boasted climate control year round. Department stores, cafes, hair salons, and postal services offered shoppers more convenience in completing daily or weekly errands. Many of the stores were branch locations of downtown establishments, giving consumers easier ways to visit their favorite shops without the hassle of driving downtown. In a city that suffered through long, cold winters, living plants, tables, and benches cheerfully filled the indoor walkways and courtyards and created spaces for community activities. Southdale marked a new design for retail establishments that would quickly alter patterns of shopping.

The emergence of shopping malls in the suburban landscape allowed for new consumer patterns to develop. The shopping center further segregated white, middle-class suburbanites and eliminated their need to travel into urban areas altogether. The

---

<sup>329</sup> Jeffrey Hartwick, *Mall Maker: Victor Gruen, Architect of an American Dream* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 5.

<sup>330</sup> Longstreth, *American Department Store*, 170.



emphasis on automobile travel and locales outside of walking neighborhoods combined with limited public transportation infrastructure restricted malls almost exclusively to suburban families with cars. While the new retail centers focused on middle-class clients in a way that earlier department stores did not, the malls, much like suburban housing developments, remained racially segregated.<sup>331</sup> Shopping at malls became a family affair; designers planned shopping centers specifically for suburban, white, female shoppers and advertised wider parking spots and stroller ramps for mothers with young children.<sup>332</sup> Shoppers could spend an entire day at a mall without worrying about safety, traffic, parking, inclement weather, or encountering non-white people.

An analysis of the NorthPark Center illustrates how store design shifted within the new demographic of the regional shopping center. When it opened in 1965, the NorthPark Mall in Dallas was the world's largest climate-controlled mall. The shopping center, with three anchor department stores, illustrates how retailers worked to brand their stores within a mall, creating a distinct personality for the store while differentiating it from other stores within the shopping center. The building's L-shaped plan housed Neiman Marcus on one end, J.C. Penney on the other, and Titcher-Goettinger, a regional department store, in the corner in between the two. The flagship locations of Titcher-Goettinger and Neiman Marcus were just across the street from each other in downtown Dallas and competed over the years for customers. By the mid-twentieth century, Titcher-Goettinger largely served the middle class, while

---

<sup>331</sup> Cohen, *Consumer's Republic*, 257.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid., 257; Longstreth, *American Department Store*, 197.

Neiman Marcus continued to define itself as a luxury retailer.<sup>333</sup> Situated in the sprawl of Dallas, just five miles from downtown, NorthPark was a modern marvel that could serve both downtown clients and suburban families, though it catered to its suburban surroundings. Whether shoppers were looking to spend or save, NorthPark accommodated all with 1.3 million square feet of shopping space, perfectly heated and cooled interiors, seemingly endless parking, and a collection of essential stores at all price points.

NorthPark owner and developer, Raymond Nasher (1921-2007) shared Gruen's vision for the shopping center. Nasher, a real-estate developer who had previously worked on residential projects, saw promise in retail development. He selected the initial location for NorthPark and then hired real estate economist Dr. Homer Hoyt to study the projected site.<sup>334</sup> Hoyt predicted that at the time of completion, NorthPark would serve a trading area of seven hundred ninety-four thousand people with an aggregate annual income of \$1.8 billion. He anticipated that, by 1975, the population would rise to 1.2 million and that the annual aggregate income would reach \$2.5 billion.<sup>335</sup> Nasher hired Strouse, Greenberg & Company of Philadelphia, a nationally acclaimed firm spearheading leasing in regional shopping

---

<sup>333</sup> Stanley Marcus, *Minding the Store* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2001), 81.

<sup>334</sup> Longstreth, *American Department Store, 191-193*, discusses the importance of location and how the standard placement of regional shopping center locations shifted in the 1950s and 1960s. Sites were chosen based size, proximity to major roads, and economic studies that projected community and income growth.

<sup>335</sup> NorthPark Center Press Packet, 1965, NorthPark Archival Collection. NorthPark Center, Dallas, TX.

centers across the country, as the leasing agent. “Pioneers in leasing of shopping centers,” Nasher believed the firm had expertise in shoppers’ needs: “what they want, how they buy, how they are motivated.”<sup>336</sup> Led by partner Sydney Greenberg, they managed “tenant-mix,” determining the types of stores, their placement within the center, and how much space each needed.<sup>337</sup>

With a solid team of experts, Nasher worked to achieve his altruistic idea: to create an “uplifting experience for man” through his shopping center while responding to the “urbanization problems” of the era.<sup>338</sup> Echoing the sentiments of Gruen, Nasher hoped to establish a “city within a city.”<sup>339</sup> Claiming the city of the 1960s had “unhealthy social conditions and an unsound economic climate,” Nasher spoke of his concept for NorthPark: “to counteract the confusions of the city by creating an environment, an urban flavor, which has dignity, order, character, and integrity. Through research, analysis, and planning, urban ideas have been formulated for NorthPark to conceive a new urban complex designed on the human scales to enhance the dignity of man’s living experience.”<sup>340</sup> While Nasher’s reflections on the shopping

---

<sup>336</sup> Ibid., “Streusel, Greenberg & Company.”

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

<sup>338</sup> Darwin Payne, “An Artist with Steel, Bricks,” *Dallas Times Herald*, 15 August 1965.

<sup>339</sup> NorthPark Center Press Packet, “Nasher Concept for NorthPark;” Victor Gruen and Larry Smith, *Shopping Towns USA: The Planning of Shopping Centers* (New York: Reinhold, 1960) outlines how to conceptualize and develop a shopping mall. Nasher’s steps parallel their advice on location, setting up teams of experts, tenant-mix, and services, suggesting that Nasher looked to a standard in shopping center design.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid.

center appear lofty, perhaps, capitalism did at the time appear to offer a solution to decaying cities in Cold War-era Dallas. Nasher's view of NorthPark as salvation, may have contributed to the difficulties he had in selling the idea to his peers. Rather than simply consider the development a major step forward in the evolution of retailing, Nasher positioned NorthPark as the definitive future urban retail paradigm.

Creating a suburban Mecca such as NorthPark proved challenging for developers, however. With limited space, tight budgets, and the task of getting a variety of necessary and appealing stores to lease space, a wholly satisfactory final product initially seemed difficult to achieve and maintain. Building standards of regional shopping centers in the 1950s called for just one anchor department store, and still into the 1960s, many shopping centers followed this approach. Duel-anchor shopping centers sparked resistance among store executives who "wanted to be the dominant force in a shopping center, not to cooperate with a downtown rival."<sup>341</sup> Rivalries aside, in 1956, economist Hoyt published a study on shopping centers in *Urban Land* claiming that duel-anchor shopping centers broadened clientele and enhanced trade for the entire mall.<sup>342</sup> While shopping centers began adopting multi-anchor plans in the mid-1950s, many stores resisted and, in 1965, NorthPark's plan still seemed novel. Even Stanley Marcus, a visionary in the retail field, questioned the idea. Marcus initially resisted Nasher's offer for a prime location in NorthPark Center. As Nasher shared later in his life, the NorthPark deal hinged on his ability to secure

---

<sup>341</sup> Longstreth, *American Department Store*, 196.

<sup>342</sup> Homer Hoyt, "Impact of Suburban Shopping Centers," *Urban Land*, September 1956, 1; Longstreth, *American Department Store*, 195.

Neiman Marcus as an anchor store because if they accepted, he knew other stores would too.<sup>343</sup> Nasher recalled about convincing Marcus, “[He] first thought I was irrational. Here he had a profitable suburban store two miles away and I was telling him to move it to this cotton field.”<sup>344</sup> Nasher’s dream alone did not seem to be enough to convince Marcus to move his suburban store to NorthPark; apparently, Marcus only agreed to open the new store in NorthPark after Nasher arranged to pay the remaining amount owed on his lease at Preston Center and cover a large portion of the finishing touches for the new store.<sup>345</sup>

Upon the completion of NorthPark Center, a new conversation about suburban shopping patterns emerged. In April 1966, *Architectural Record* published an article on shopping centers, which focused on NorthPark and discussed location, aesthetics, and how the buildings responded to the needs of customers.<sup>346</sup> As *Architectural Record* explained, “Today’s shopper...is acknowledged to have wants and needs firmly in mind before she ventures forth—and she has the mobility to go where they can best be satisfied. Further overriding conscious practicality is the non-verbalized motivation of all creatures to avoid stress, to respond positively to convenience,

---

<sup>343</sup> Jean Dimeo, “Developer Won 6-Year Struggle for Dream,” *Dallas Times Herald*, 11 March 1990, A-18.

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>345</sup> Skip Hollandsworth, “The Cream of the Shop,” *Texas Monthly*, August 2015, <http://www.texasmonthly.com/the-culture/the-cream-of-the-shop/>.

<sup>346</sup> “Shopping Centers and Stores,” *Architectural Record*, April 1966, 149-170.

comfort and beauty—and negatively to danger, tension and ugliness.”<sup>347</sup> In short, according to the article, suburban shoppers were equipped with the opportunity and the means to choose selectively where to shop, and they used a number of criteria to make that choice. This consumer leverage meant that, in order to successfully compete in the marketplace, individual stores, as well as the shopping centers housing them, needed to make shoppers feel like the stores could cater to consumers’ personal needs. Because each store enjoyed the same parking and location conveniences, the same climate-controlled atmosphere, and the same picturesque environment, stores needed to extend the concept of “personality” to help shoppers identify with their store. Within the shopping mall, “personality” became a necessary form of company branding to set one store apart from the next.

NorthPark achieved Nasher ‘s vision with a three-level, twenty-five acre plan atop a ninety-four acre site. Designers considered the building a unified structure and used a single palette of white brick, cast stone, and concrete to create a harmony across the entire complex. Surrounded by 6,000 parking spaces, each within an easy walking distance of no more than 350 feet from an entrance, the parking lot paid tribute to its surrounding suburban community with bushes and trees spread across park-like medians. *Architectural Record* described the vegetation as “humanized,”<sup>348</sup> suggesting its superiority compared to the barbaric and chaotic city streets. The author further compared the mall to city streets, noting that the spaces “must be more subtle than obsession with store fronts, visibility and prime traffic locations. The shopping

---

<sup>347</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid., 151.

mall is not a street of stores. It is a starting place for errands and adventures, a stopping place for meetings and for relaxation.”<sup>349</sup> Architects and designers described the building’s floor plan as “not a street of stores but a flowing series of naturally lighted plazas.”<sup>350</sup> The arrangement of stores suggested the growing disconnect with downtown shopping and the introduction of a new way to leisurely shop and stroll through a mall decorated by fountains, vegetation, and artwork. Much like Gruen’s ideal, NorthPark replaced the community aspect of a city, and offered a safe and easy place for shoppers to walk around. While stores on a city street used façades and windows to pull customers inside, the shopping mall relied on a more nuanced merchandising approach. For department stores, this approach increased the importance of creating defined interiors that also appeared familiar and welcoming to shoppers.

Teams of architects, designers, and contractors worked with Harrell and Hamilton, the NorthPark general architectural firm, to ensure a unified look that defined the shopping center as a whole. NorthPark was the one of the first shopping centers to “demand control” over store signage and logos to aesthetically guarantee a unified mall interior.<sup>351</sup> The NorthPark press packet explained that so that the “cancers of flashing neon signs and the use of buildings as billboards could be eradicated... The ugliness of crass, distorted nameplates and numbers would be replaced by dignified,

---

<sup>349</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>351</sup> “NorthPark,” *Architectural Record*, January 1976, 138.

thoughtful lettering.”<sup>352</sup> A postcard of the interior hallways illustrates the homogeneity of the mall’s signage and interior storefronts. The photograph shows a view down a hallway with unassuming signs either flush with each store’s opening or hung on a small neutral panel. There are no bright colors or neon lights to highlight store names, ensuring a uniform feel in the space.

As discussed in Chapter Three, department store designers used “personality” to help shoppers identify with and feel comfortable in new suburban stores. As those stores joined unified, multi-anchor shopping centers, corporate identity became an important concern. Nasher’s unified vision for NorthPark, and the evolving culture of cover shopping malls more broadly, pushed department stores to develop a distinguished identity beyond simply reflecting their local community’s “personality.” Designers used interior spaces to support and enhance corporate identity and to project the core values of the company to lure new customers inside. In exploring how Neiman Marcus and J.C. Penney used their buildings and interiors to define the stores at the NorthPark Center, we can begin to see how the shopping center encouraged stores to further develop their own brands. Neiman Marcus hired their own architectural firm, Eero Saarinen & Associates, while Titcher-Goettinger and J.C. Penney employed Harrell and Hamilton, the mall’s general architectural consultant, to complete their spaces.

The J.C. Penney store illustrates the company’s evolution since Batten’s iconic memo. The simplest of the three department stores, J.C. Penney’s building rises just two stories high; it is a crisp white, nearly windowless structure surrounded by

---

<sup>352</sup> NorthPark Center Press Packet, “Nasher Concept for NorthPark.”



parking. Completely glossed over by *Architectural Record's* article on NorthPark, the store was, perhaps, the least compelling of the three anchor retailers, although its presence suggests that the company had finally embraced modern retail trends. The NorthPark location shows just how far the J.C. Penney Company developed during the mid-twentieth century. In fact, the crisp white, monolithic building was the opposite of the store's former signature look. The NorthPark location exemplified how the Penney Company embraced and interpreted modern interior design trends, and used visual identity to engage with a larger set of shoppers within a regional shopping center.

The store was built upon the look and style of the King of Prussia location, suggesting that new shopping centers led the Penney Company to redefine its corporate image. *The Dallas News* stressed J.C. Penney's "modern approach to layout, merchandising, and display" which Batten declared was a representation of "the new generation of Penney stores."<sup>353</sup> Jerry Gusewelle, group fashion merchandiser for the Dallas-Fort Worth Penney stores, said the new Penneys would be unrecognizable compared to the old: "The whole atmosphere at NorthPark is new, and different merchandise, and a better selection than can be seen in other J.C. Penney stores."<sup>354</sup> Gusewelle noted that in addition to the transformation of the look of the store, the type of merchandise sold at NorthPark also changed. NorthPark "traded up" by offering "top line goods in every department as well as the less expensive lines" that

---

<sup>353</sup> Lynn Slepicka, "Penneys Has Eye on Finance Firm," *Dallas Morning News*, undated clipping, Press Scrapbook, NorthPark Center Archives.

<sup>354</sup> Linda Reneau, "Penny's Going High, Low in Fashion," unidentified clipping, 17 July 1964, Press Scrapbook, NorthPark Center Archives.

consumers expected when shopping at J.C. Penney.<sup>355</sup> The new assortment of merchandise at NorthPark, a first for the company, illustrates how Batten's leadership redefined Penny's image and enhanced its appeal to a larger consumer base.<sup>356</sup> In an effort to entice the entire range of income levels shopping at NorthPark, J.C. Penney shifted away from its budget-conscious roots and moved towards a "full-line" store with more variety in cost and merchandise.<sup>357</sup> In adding new merchandise and revamping the store's corporate image through interior design, Batten hoped to align the Penney Company's mid-level department stores. Batten encouraged J.C. Penney to compete with other retailers in large shopping centers. On opening day, to celebrate its new image, youth donned sashes that read, "See Penneys New Total Look, Junior Fashions" and handed out flowers while greeting shoppers. The store celebrated a new visual aesthetic, expanded merchandise offerings and new departments that included the entire family in shopping.

The interior design of the store showcased the Penney Company's new image. Similar to the retailer's King of Prussia store, Penneys NorthPark illustrated continuity in corporate merchandising trends and exemplified Kagel's corporate design program.<sup>358</sup> A photograph taken of the Penney's entrance from the mall court in 1965

---

<sup>355</sup> Ibid.

<sup>356</sup> "Higher Fashions to Cute New Penney's Opening in Dallas," *Women's Wear Daily* 111, no. 14 (21 July 1965): 39.

<sup>357</sup> "Confirm Penney NorthPark Will be Full-Line Unit," *Women's Wear Daily* 107, no. 58 (20 September 1963): 7.

<sup>358</sup> It has been quite difficult to find a complete interior image of the Penneys NorthPark store. Even with all the press coverage, and the importance of the store, photographs are not included in the J.C. Penney Papers. Because we

illustrates how mall shoppers would have seen the interior. The store appears organized and orderly with an unobstructed, expansive view of the sales floor. Cases suggest that Penneys incorporated assisted browsing as well as self-selection, perhaps in hopes of appealing to a larger shopping audience.

Two images of the store's interior show how the store employed open stock fixtures and encouraged self-service methods of shopping. The first photograph, taken on opening day at NorthPark, July 22, 1965, shows a vast array of merchandise on display in the men's gift department. The photograph is taken from behind a counter and shows three women and a man in the aisle between cases. The store looks similar to the King of Prussia location, with aisles wide enough for groups of people to shop and merchandise neatly stacked. Flowers celebrating opening day decorate the shelves in the background and male mannequins flaunt trendy apparel. Another photograph taken the following year illustrates a promotion in the cosmetics department for Yardley's Jaguar Lotion, a toiletry for young men. Advertisers placed a Jaguar sports car in the cosmetics department and hired Diane Hoyer, Yardley's Young London Look Girl, to hand out samples of the lotion.<sup>359</sup> The sales floor is slightly visible in the background revealing repetitive square columns and rows of florescent, drop-ceiling lighting fixtures. Just as in the photo of opening day, the department appears fully stocked—perhaps even overstocked—with merchandise. The amount of accessories

---

know Kagel spearheaded the corporate design program we can use images of similar sized stores that opened around the same time to get a stronger sense for how the NorthPark location looked.

<sup>359</sup> "Promoting Jaguar Lotion," *Dallas Morning News*, 25 November 1966, 20.

and cosmetics visible on the sales floor represents a contrast to the Neiman Marcus store, which employed a “less is more” approach to display. The Penney Company’s use of open stock embraces self-service almost entirely, giving customers access to the entire line of merchandise. One display unit appears to hold at least sixty pair of sunglasses, drawing a parallel to Loewy’s fixture that held 250 pairs of pants. On one hand, the store appears bursting at the seams with merchandise, suggesting adherence to an older ideal; simultaneously, however, the interior employs modern self-service techniques. In NorthPark, the Penney Company used expanded merchandise lines and contemporary fixtures to identify itself with the suburban consumer. It also incorporated a unified design standard that distinguished the space from other stores of the era and established it as part of the Penneys’ brand.

While the Penney Company attempted to “trade up” and encourage more mid-level shoppers through merchandise and display, Neiman Marcus similarly sought to capitalize on a larger shopper demographic. On the other end of the mall, Neiman Marcus also used interior design and display to encourage mall shoppers to come inside. While NorthPark placed limits on stores by enforcing a distinct experience throughout the entire mall space, Stanley Marcus pushed hard to distinguish Neiman Marcus from the rest of the shopping mall. In the 1950s, Neiman Marcus’s Preston Center location demonstrated that the atmosphere of the store and its commitment to the brand were important aspects in design, and Marcus was determined to do the same in NorthPark. For Neiman Marcus, the NorthPark store was an important branch location because it replaced Preston Center, which Neiman Marcus executives,

according to a press release, felt the expanding population had outgrown.<sup>360</sup> Marcus positioned his store as both inviting yet distinct in an effort to appeal to new shoppers as well as longtime patrons.

This location illustrates how covered shopping centers, which united more than one hundred stores, created new challenges as stores strategically worked to define the personality and atmosphere of department stores within. First, Neiman Marcus upgraded the NorthPark exterior to distinguish it from the rest of the mall and to set it apart from the other anchor stores. *Architectural Record* described the new store as having “distinct detailing” which was slightly more sophisticated than the other stores yet “consistent with the prestigious character of this store.”<sup>361</sup> Working with the acclaimed architectural firm Eero Saarinen and Associates, Marcus showcased his elevated brand through the building’s design. While it is unclear whether or not Marcus hired Saarinen for the project before he passed away in 1961 or if he hired Saarinen’s associates Kevin Roche and John Dinkeloo, Saarinen’s name was attached to the project.<sup>362</sup> Roche remembers working on the project, stating that “there was

---

<sup>360</sup> “Interiors of the new Neiman Marcus Landmark in NorthPark Celebrate a mood of youth and gaiety,” Press Release, 1965, Stanley Marcus Collection, unorganized papers, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.

<sup>361</sup> Shopping Centers and Stores,” 156.

<sup>362</sup> Kevin Roche, interview by Alessandra Wood, 10 September 2015. The NorthPark Press Release claims that Saarinen began the project before he passed away, but Kevin Roche remembers meeting Stanley Marcus while they served together on a board of development for an airport. Roche says Marcus invited him to Dallas to meet Ray Nasher to discuss the development of NorthPark before hiring him to design the Neiman Marcus stores.

nothing to relate to.”<sup>363</sup> His thoughts reveal the novelty of this type of structure in 1965. With so few examples of similar successful stores, Roche struggled with the design, stating that “the problem was how to make it look interesting, and you had nothing to work with.”<sup>364</sup> He recalled his first time ever visiting a shopping mall with a few designer friends who were intrigued by the concept: “A few years earlier when we were in Detroit, Charles Eames was getting interested in the evolution of the shopping mall, and he called me... I put together a group of about five guys and we shot about hundreds and hundreds of photographs of this mall. It was the first time I’d ever been in one.”<sup>365</sup> Roche’s sentiments illustrate the novelty of covered malls in the 1960s and the ways in which designers created new standards within these early spaces.

Though it employed the same white bricks as the rest of the mall, the Neiman Marcus building had a stepped façade with round turrets (which allowed daylight to grace private fitting rooms). Photographs show floor-to-ceiling windows at the entrance door creating a dramatic contrast with the rest of the structure.<sup>366</sup> With doorways tucked away, visitors entered through a courtyard, rather than a sidewalk along the parking lot as they did at J.C. Penney. The entrances depicted in the photograph create an aura of intimacy and culture; the courtyards are lined with plants

---

<sup>363</sup> Kevin Roche Interview.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

<sup>366</sup> Roche remembers being “very pleased” with his idea to add “curved dressing room areas” and break the standard plan of a “large box” for department stores, Kevin Roche Interview.

and sculptures. Though situated in a shopping mall with a number of other stores, the exterior structure of Neiman Marcus maintained the store's brand and its elevated feel; it remained distinctly different from the rest of the mall—perhaps a nod to the fact that Stanley Marcus believed there was no other store in the world like Neiman Marcus.

The interior further defined the store and reflected the goal to create a distinct yet appealing personality within it. Le Maire designed the interior in a manner that emulated Preston Center, an atmosphere that welcomed wealthy and middle-class shoppers alike. Explaining her designs for NorthPark in a description of the project, Le Maire stated, “The interior design conveys the graciousness and dignity that have characterized Neiman Marcus since the day of its founding—but in a slightly younger tempo, a gayer key, attuned to the youth and vigor of a growing suburban area.”<sup>367</sup> The description indicates the store's continuing effort to move away from the regal, formal interiors of the downtown store and shift towards a less formal, more inviting atmosphere in new suburban retail spaces.

Le Maire wanted to connect with the “youth and vigor” of the store's shoppers—or put more bluntly, shoppers with more modest means—and she did so with whimsical and inviting spaces throughout the store. For its entire history, Neiman Marcus identified with luxury goods; however, in 1953, *Business Week* implied that the store actually sold as much or more merchandise to middle-class families than to wealthier ones.<sup>368</sup> Describing the store's two “personalities,” *Business Week*

---

<sup>367</sup> “Interiors of the new Neiman Marcus Landmark,” 2.

<sup>368</sup> “A Store that Serves Two Markets,” *Business Week*, 19 September 1953, 137.

explained, “The fact is that Neiman Marcus does sell to the upper crust—and to the icing on top of the crust. But, with less fanfare and publicity, it sells even more to a less well-to-do, family budgeted group that might be described as the upper-mass market. Saleswise, Neiman Marcus has a well developed, well controlled split personality.”<sup>369</sup> The store’s success selling to the “upper-mass market” likely informed how Le Maire approached the design of NorthPark. The store needed to compete with other retailers in NorthPark that offered a comfortable price point for middle-class shoppers, while still catering to the “upper crust.” In doing so, the NorthPark location developed a distinct look, reminiscent of the Preston Center store.

Neiman Marcus opened just before NorthPark’s grand opening. Newspapers commented that the new store felt more “realistic” with displays of women’s merchandise showcasing “things the way a woman would see them or wear them in her home.”<sup>370</sup> An example of “realistic” display from a photograph is an armoire lined with the same fabric used on the walls and filled with clothing and accessories. This was just one armoire of many used throughout the store. While this particular armoire may lead one to question the newspaper’s idea of “realistic” display, it does suggest a turning point for display during this time period. A brightly painted and upholstered antique armoire with its doors swung open and clothing hanging at the hinges likely did not represent reality for most shoppers; however, the introduction of domestic furniture within the space clearly contributed to the “realistic” feel of Neiman Marcus.

---

<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

<sup>370</sup> “Light, Airy, Yet Realistic: New Neiman-Marcus,” *Dallas Morning News*, 25 July 1965.



Rather than a space entirely filled with rows of cases and staged merchandise, the inclusion of more comfortable furniture distinguished the store from others within the mall—and even from designs within earlier Neiman Marcus stores. A photograph of the seasonal sportswear department shows a similar use of popular domestic furniture. Windsor chairs with bright colored wool seats connect the space with mid-century Colonial Revival interiors—conjuring the ambiance of the homes of targeted shoppers. The Windsor chairs create a familiar and welcoming space within the traditional sales floor. Though the space still contains cases and garment racks, the sets of chairs encourage shoppers to sit, relax, and socialize with friends. The wide aisles and abundance of seating is reminiscent of the Preston Center store, suggesting a continuity of how Le Maire and Marcus positioned the store within a suburban market.

At one hundred-forty thousand square feet, more than twice the size of Preston Center, NorthPark contained a greater variety of merchandise and specialized departments formerly reserved for downtown, such as salon shopping and fine jewelry. While the rest of the store maintained a more casual atmosphere, salon shopping at NorthPark remained an exclusive and elevated event. Even still, a photograph of the better dress salon illustrates that even the elevated departments shared the sense of realism. Decorated in “French Provincial” style, the better dress salon takes the form of a drawing room—an antithesis to the consumer space beyond its walls. The space looks and feels like a living room with very little merchandise suggesting otherwise. The salon also includes another antique armoire with a single piece of clothing hanging inside. Again, perhaps the “realistic” feel of this space comes from Le Maire’s use of domestic furniture within.

Le Maire worked to create a department store that employed new design standards to define a dichotomous atmosphere. A Neiman Marcus press release described details of the store, indicating the company's commitment to remaining current with new retail design principles while showcasing a distinct personality: "Departments are further identified by color, design, floor treatment, and merchandise displays. Broad aisles lead the visitor effortlessly through the store. In many selling areas actual selling operations are off the main aisles by placing counters in such a manner that business may be negotiated in inner areas sheltered from traffic."<sup>371</sup> The store employed colors to segregate departments, much like the earlier spaces designed by Loewy. Though it strove for a modern, open floor plan, the upscale nature of the store relied on older methods of "sheltered" counters allowing customers to check out with less traffic and more privacy. The interior decoration also highlighted the store's distinct character: "The color palette is exciting, wide and handsome, ranging from fresh pastels to vivid hues with occasional electric juxtapositions. Art works from the Stanley Marcus collection are placed at telling points, and whimsical touches periodically enliven the surroundings."<sup>372</sup> The artwork and "whimsical touches" helped distinguish Neiman Marcus from the other stores within the shopping center. The interior design included artist installations, such as The Little Mermaid soup and sandwich bar designed by Danish artist Bjorn Wiinblad. Filled with colorful tile work and mermaid figurines, the casual eatery opened to the selling floor and added a unique and artistic flair to the space. The lunch counter-style bar and understated

---

<sup>371</sup> "Interiors of the new Neiman Marcus Landmark," 2.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid.

materials such as clay tiles and molded plywood chairs, enhanced to the relaxed atmosphere.

A photograph of the ladies' shoe department shows floor-to-ceiling windows that offered a "refreshing vista" of the sculpture garden outside.<sup>373</sup> The department also paired colorful, tufted chairs with a pair of antique Siamese figures that flanked either side of the window. The figures from Stanley Marcus's personal collection added to the store's exclusive personality. While Neiman Marcus was a modern setting for suburban retailing, it remained a cutting-edge fashion store that displayed the works of contemporary artists alongside collectable antiques in a dramatic yet welcoming fashion. The photograph also shows how the store incorporated natural sunlight in a number of places, evoking the ambiance of Preston Center.

NorthPark represented Neiman Marcus's first inclusion in an enclosed shopping mall filled with consumers who were unfamiliar with the store and who had no plans to shop there. The interior and exterior design reflect the company's determination to define the store's identity in a sea of other shops. Neiman Marcus became both a casual and welcoming atmosphere while remaining true to its commitment to quality and goods. The challenge of attaining this balance became apparent when, a few months after opening in 1965, the NorthPark store fine jewelry associates complained that their department was "over-exposed."<sup>374</sup> While they had

---

<sup>373</sup> "Eleanor Le Maire Creates a Euphoric Atmosphere for Shopping," *Contract Interiors*, December 1965, 93.

<sup>374</sup> Letter from Eleanor Le Maire to Stanley Marcus, 31 December 1965, Stanley Marcus Collection (Collection A93.1869), Box 56, Folder 14, , DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.

“done well” in terms of selling, the associates wished for a more private shopping setting for fine jewelry. A photograph of the fine jewelry department highlights the openness of the layout. Defined not by partitions, but only by visual cues such as color and shapes, a circular area below a “cool blue oval dome” is mimicked by a circular “custom-made ombre rug” atop the more casual terrazzo tile floor.<sup>375</sup> Though situated on the second floor, which did not originally contain a mall entrance, the openness of the department may have encouraged window-shopping by mall-goers wandering throughout the Neiman Marcus interior. Le Maire addressed this issue in a letter to Stanley Marcus, writing about the need for “preventing the general buying public from ‘flowing into’ Neiman Marcus without truly being aware of it.”<sup>376</sup> The store struggled to find the delicate balance between what *Business Week* called the establishment’s two personalities—one that invited shoppers into the store and the other that simultaneously defined the space as Neiman Marcus, a distinct shopping experience.

Neiman Marcus intended to use more casual interior display to lure general NorthPark shoppers inside the store. Even though the store’s press release deemed the mall level entrance “more casual” than the rest of the store, a few months after opening, Le Maire questioned her original design.<sup>377</sup> Le Maire was concerned that from the mall entrance, shoppers only saw “sheltered merchandise.” She suggested the

---

<sup>375</sup> “Eleanor Le Maire Creates A Euphoric Atmosphere For Shopping,” 94.

<sup>376</sup> Letter from Eleanor Le Maire to Stanley Marcus, 31 December 1965, Stanley Marcus Collection (A93.1869), Box 199, Folder 14, , , DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.

<sup>377</sup> Sara Marshall, Neiman Marcus Press Release, 14 June 1965, NorthPark Corporate Archives, NorthPark, Dallas, Texas.

closed cases “may lack interest” to shoppers. Instead, she proposed a new idea and called for “open selling and appealing items to attract attention.”<sup>378</sup> Together Le Maire and Stanley Marcus wished to strike a balance between serving the two types of consumers who entered Neiman Marcus, especially since NorthPark catered largely to middle-class customers from the growing suburbs. It is unclear whether or not the store addressed these challenges immediately or if it evolved the design over time. The projected personality of NorthPark represented Neiman Marcus’s attempt to appeal to two groups of shoppers while creating an environment completely distinct from the rest of the shopping center.

In the 1960s, Stanley Marcus’s correspondence with Le Maire reveals his fears of cheapening the store through the use of more standard display practices, such as self-selection. The matter of revising merchandising techniques became more pressing as Neiman Marcus competed with the sea of tenants at NorthPark. Marcus did not always agree with her suggestions, yet Le Maire continued to push him towards a more modern system of display in all of the company’s stores. In a 1967 letter from Le Maire to Marcus discussing the design of a new department at NorthPark, the Silver Key, the designer argued for a need to reconsider merchandising methods. Le Maire attempted to convince Marcus, who was obviously hesitant about self-selection, that the trend would not jeopardize his store’s sophisticated ambiance. She wrote, “The general trend of recognizing the desire on the part of buying public to be able to see and feel all, that is for pre-selection, it seems to me that we can achieve this for the

---

<sup>378</sup> Letter from Eleanor Le Maire to Stanley Marcus, 31 December 1965, Stanley Marcus Collection (A93.1869), Box 199, Folder 14, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.

Silver Key without sacrificing the other.”<sup>379</sup> While they hoped to push the store in a more modern direction, the design team was well aware of Marcus’s opinion.

In 1967, Robert Malderez, an associate of Le Maire, suggested replacing an old armoire with a rod to gain four feet of hanging space in the NorthPark store. He realized the ideas might not sit well with Stanley Marcus, noting, “Of course, it goes without saying, that the addition of this type of merchandising is in direct contrast to the feeling of euphoria which Mr. Marcus admires and is achieved principally by the sort of elegant residential type of décor in evidence at Bonwit Teller’s newly decorated sixth floor”<sup>380</sup> Malderez’s comments suggest that Marcus believed more in the importance of atmosphere than in boosting efficiency at Neiman Marcus.

Malderez prepared a report for Stanley Marcus on the new Lord & Taylor and B. Altman stores in Paramus, New Jersey, two stores well outside of Neiman Marcus’s Texas trading area. Visiting the new Lord & Taylor just one day after it opened to the public, Malderez noted that the store had made “no serious attempt to innovate or promote new design or space in merchandising” at either Paramus store: “They were both straightforward budget installations. This would apply to the architecture of the building as well as the fixturing and general décor.”<sup>381</sup> Malderez noted that both stores

---

<sup>379</sup> Letter from Eleanor Le Maire to Stanley Marcus, 3 March 1967, Stanley Marcus Collection (Collection A93.1869), Box 56, Folder 11, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.

<sup>380</sup> Inter Office Memo, Robert Malderez to Eleanor Le Maire, 5 October 1967, Stanley Marcus Collection (Collection A93.1869), Box 56, Folder 11, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.

<sup>381</sup> Eleanor Le Maire Associates, Inter-Office Memo to Eleanor Le Maire from Robert Malderez, 20 February 1967, Stanley Marcus Collection, Box 56, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.

used either the same (in B. Altman's case) or similar fixtures throughout the store, and neither considered much change in the more expensive departments. Malderez commented that each store allowed individual departments to control their own lighting. His report of the two stores suggested the ways in which Neiman Marcus also wished to elevate the company's store from the standard retail spaces.

In a change of tune, Stanley Marcus responded to the report, perhaps finally convinced that modern methods proved more efficient. Marcus realized that many simplified architectural features resulted in lower operating costs for stores, and he finally considered adopting new ideas: "I think it is essential that your designers give increasing thought and attention to simplification of design so that we too can make a profit from the operation of the new stores. There's no question that something is lost when you eliminate interesting details, but there's no purpose in building stores unless you can make money of them."<sup>382</sup> Though hesitant to adapt certain features of new stores, Marcus realized the importance of trimming costs and appreciated the new methods that would support those tactics. A turning point in his commitment to the store's design, Marcus finally indulged, at least intellectually, in new ideas. Though he used saving money as the reason for accepting a pared down interior design, it can be inferred that Marcus finally accepted that the contemporary selling methods would not hurt his brand's reputation. Were that the case, he likely would not have requested styling similar to that used in other stores, designs that his firm had referred to as

---

<sup>382</sup> Letter Stanley Marcus to Eleanor Le Maire in response to 20 February 1967 report, 24 February 1967, Stanley Marcus Collection (Collection A93.1869), Box 56, Folder 11, DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.

“straightforward budget installations.”<sup>383</sup> This drastic change in Marcus’s thoughts and his request for more affordable interiors suggests that the notion of personality shifted in the mid-1960s. While it was important for stores to define their brand, it was also important to show some constancy with larger retail trends.

While Neiman Marcus worked to make the store’s brand more compatible with interior display, the Penney Company continued the push to align store design with modern retail concepts. This became increasingly necessary as the store entered large shopping centers. As J.C. Penney executives realized the larger sales potential in suburban shopping malls, the company relocated many downtown stores within these newer developments. In 1971, J.C. Penney abandoned the downtown Lancaster store for an anchor position at the new Park City Shopping Center, an enclosed mall in the Lancaster suburbs. A stark contrast to the small downtown unit, the exterior of the new Lancaster store reinforced the new personality developed by the company in the 1960s. A longstanding brand in the Lancaster community, the Park City location replaced Lancaster’s downtown Penney’s store. The old turn-of-the-century, Main Street building appeared dated as the community outgrew the store. With the company’s quest for a new image, the suburban J.C. Penney in Park City offered a new face in the Lancaster community to the established brand. Similar to the design of the King of Prussia and NorthPark stores, the expansive location exemplifies the design program of the 1960s. The structure is windowless with just two stories and a large footprint; it is surrounded by seemingly endless parking.<sup>384</sup> A photograph of the

---

<sup>383</sup> Malderez memo.

<sup>384</sup> Longstreth notes the trend of windowless, low, and wide profiles in "Sears, Roebuck and the Remaking of the Department Store, 1924-42," *Journal of*



housewares department illustrates how overhead signs led shoppers through the store, assisted by pathways on the floor demarcated by contrasts in the materials from which they are made. The image illustrates how fixtures organize and display china, glassware, and accessories, while movable units store excess stock. The fixture in the foreground displays special merchandise, likely seasonal, and provides flexibility in the location and type of merchandise on display. Displays in the background show how the department highlights specific dish sets and housewares. Again, the amount of merchandise on display far exceeds that of Neiman Marcus's norm, suggesting that, perhaps, that part of the Penney Company's corporate identity and strategy hinged on having a large array of available stock.

The new Lancaster building measured two hundred forty-four thousand square feet, more than ten times the size of the typical J.C. Penney store in 1961. The Park City Store expressed the culmination of J.C. Penney's "new image," which Batten and Kagel had developed in the 1960s. The leaders transformed the brand from a small, downtown soft-goods retailer boasting honesty and quality to a large, suburban powerhouse with fashionable goods for the whole family. The new store brand captured the personality of the American suburbs. It sold desirable merchandise and had a large assortment and stock, in a new, familiar, clean, and comfortable environment.

While J.C. Penney may have been a bit late to encompass trends in the 1950s, their timing paid off. As *Forbes* noted in 1969, "Penny caught the new trend at a time when competitors were finding themselves locked in at locations adapted to the

---

*the Society of Architectural Historians* 65, no. 2 (2006).

fashions of an earlier time.”<sup>385</sup> Essentially, other stores who moved into strip malls and freestanding locations in the 1950s were locked into leases, and many could not afford to move into large suburban shopping centers in the 1960s. Penny’s, having resisted the first wave of suburbanization, benefitted from the flexibility to move into, as *Forbes* described it, “more glamorous regional shopping center complexes.”<sup>386</sup> Both the location and the design of the store informed the personality imbued by J.C. Penney.

The Neiman Marcus and J. C. Penney locations at the NorthPark Shopping Center illustrate how two diverse department stores with different target audiences attempted to appeal to the same group of suburban mall shoppers. The leaders of each store simultaneously used interior design to define their company’s values while attempting to engage in more normative and popular display trends, such as open stock fixtures, self-service, and updated fixtures. Le Maire upheld the upscale associations of Neiman Marcus by sheltering certain departments, selectively employing full service counters, and decorating the space with art and antiques. The J.C. Penney Company engaged in a uniform plan for interior design that showcased new and updated interiors with sleek lines and modern finishes and that capitalized on self-selection. Both companies, though diverse in history and appeal, hoped to win the affection of the same group of suburban mall shoppers, a phenomenon powered by the introduction of the multi-anchor shopping center.

---

<sup>385</sup> “Can the Last Be First?,” *Forbes*, 15 March 1969.

<sup>386</sup> *Ibid.*

## Chapter 6

### CONCLUSION

The nature of design thinking changed significantly in the twentieth century, and the development of the department store reflected many of those changes. As the industrial design profession reshaped the ways that many designers considered projects, department stores, too, shifted design philosophies and transformed from architectural palaces to machines for selling. Looking back on his career in 1981, Loewy delivered a speech to the Royal Society of Arts affirming, once again, his belief of the role of design:

Industrial design's first goal was to improve the appearance, but soon I insisted that our staff place the emphasis on improved function, reduction to essentials *and* quality control.<sup>387</sup>

Loewy's thoughts sum up the changes in design practice in the mid-twentieth century. Design no longer existed as a system solely engaged to create aesthetically pleasing outcomes; rather, it became a tool to also improve functionality and quality.

This study has aimed to reveal the changes in interior design and display in department stores during the mid-twentieth century, to understand those agents of change, and to explore the new relationships between designers and department stores during that time period. In doing so, I hope to make larger contributions to studies of

---

<sup>387</sup> Raymond Loewy, "Industrial Design: Yesterday, To-day and Tomorrow?" *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 129, no. 5296 (1981), 204.

design history and the history of consumption while understanding how these disciplines are untied on multiple levels.

My work has contributed to scholarship in three major areas. First, I have worked to outline and identify visual changes in store design. Second, this study identifies the factors contributing to and the individual agents of change that sculpted design decisions in twentieth-century department stores. Finally, this study historicizes discourse on visual merchandising. The visual history of twentieth-century department stores is rich and complicated. The mid-century department store appeared unrelated to turn of the century, grandiose department stores. While many factors contributed to those changes, new trends in the mid-century resulted in a completely revised appearance that altered not only the way the stores looked, but also how they functioned. Throughout my dissertation, I have detailed these changes in interiors and display.

In the 1930s and 1940s, retail trade catalogs and government guides from the World War II era suggested a new look for retail design that took inspiration from modern design concepts such as streamlining and European *Moderne*. Robsjohn-Gibbings' renovation for the second floor of Neiman Marcus exemplified the store's desire to have a more modern feel to the space, as opposed the older, European styled interiors. His work stripped the old building of its opulent feel and redesigned the space using contemporary furnishing and modern architecture. While the war interrupted this trend, stores of the postwar era looked again towards similar ideas associated with modern design. Loewy's renovation of Foley's and Gimbels revealed the beginnings of many changes that became commonplace in 1950s and 1960s middle-class department store designs. In general, the changes resulted in less

decorated, pared down interiors that highlighted selected groupings of merchandise. Stores abandoned heavy woodwork for light, smooth cases; architectural ornamentation disappeared. Spaces employed horizontal vistas to show entire floors, as opposed to multi-story rotundas to draw the eye upwards. The color palette became brighter as did the interior in general, due to advances in electric lighting.

Loewy's designs initiated major changes in merchandise storage and location. His designs called for open stock display units that housed excess stock within fixtures, as opposed to closed stock rooms. The new fixtures altered the appearance of the sales floor as well as the ways in which customers and sales personnel negotiated the space. Shoppers no longer had to ask for help or wait for sales personnel to search the stock room for additional merchandise. Shoppers also gained the ability to browse unassisted and see all of the merchandise for sale. Loewy's merchandise layout became a hallmark of his designs and ultimately the marker of a modern (efficient) department store.

The look of fixtures supported this new trend of bringing stock onto the sales floor by housing excess merchandise. Additionally, fixtures became much lighter and less ornate. Early twentieth-century fixtures were large and assuming, crafted of dark wood with heavy carvings. These types of fixtures visually defined the interior of a store. They also contained and protected the majority of merchandise, limiting shoppers' contact with it. As the function of the fixtures changed, so too did the style. Mid-century stores employed fixtures that seemed to blend into the interior, crafted of simplified forms with glass and chrome elements. Loewy's designs exemplified the new trend for fixture design in mid-level department stores, while the work of S.S.

Silver and Company and the interiors at Neiman Marcus suggested that higher-end store designers engaged in more selective practices of display.

Beyond the bones of interior design, the development of visual merchandising aided in the creation of a new look in mid-century department stores. The cluttered interiors of stores such as Abraham and Straus in Brooklyn, New York from 1910 and McCreery Company in Pittsburgh in 1915 appeared dated in the postwar era. Mid-century stores reduced the amount of merchandise on view and presented a more organized space that highlighted selected merchandise. Higher-end stores perfected the minimalist look that relied on skilled selling, exemplified by the work of S.S. Silver and Company at Saks Fifth Avenue and Bergdorf Goodman.

While the physical changes that took place in mid-twentieth-century department stores left an obvious trace, the story of the players who orchestrated those changes is much less visible. This dissertation explores the decision makers behind the many changes in mid-twentieth-century department stores and the reasoning that compelled their actions. A major shift occurred in who made these decisions, which coincided with the many visual changes inside stores. In early department stores, managers, who consulted trade literature for advice, made the majority of design decisions. Early stores gathered advice on interior display from trade literature and fixture companies and looked inward to enact those changes. Store managers exerted control over the look and feel of the space.

The evolution of the role of the display director is revealed in J. Ullman Stewart 's journey from a window trimmer to the position of director of display. While his interior work contributed an altered atmosphere, Stewart's management of interior

display—in addition to window treatments—suggested the growing importance of consistently engaging dedicated designers to dress the store in the 1930s and 1940s.

Many early-twentieth century trade publications looked to architects to disseminate advice on store design. While architects remained active players in the mid-century, their role shifted to focus primarily on exterior planning and structural design. In the mid-century, department stores gave more agency to interior and industrial designers. Firms such as Raymond Loewy Associates made a number of decisions formerly reserved for store executives. The firm conducted studies and offered suggestions regarding which departments to include in specific stores, where to place them, how large they should be, and the amount of merchandise to stock in them, in addition to giving general aesthetic oversight. These studies illustrate both the ways in which consumption morphed into a controllable action manipulated by store design, and how the expanded role of the designer informed the spaces. Raymond Loewy Associates' role in department store projects shows that store executives gave greater agency to designers to create the new look of their spaces.

In the case of Neiman Marcus, Stanley Marcus's papers reveal his excessive involvement in many of the design decisions of the store. However, Marcus worked with Le Maire and her team, as well as a number of display associates employed by Neiman Marcus. Though opinionated, he relied greatly on the expertise of the designers to craft the most successful spaces. Heated letters between Marcus and Le Maire suggest her dedication to achieving a successfully designed space, even if the final product strayed from Marcus's vision for the store.

An interesting story of gender also arises throughout this work. In a field dominated by men—at both the level of designers and of department store

executives—this work introduces the story of a powerful woman, Eleanor Le Maire. She shattered gender barriers and contributed to the development of the modern department store interior. Her designs, while much less publicized by the media than Loewy's work, also spanned the nation. While the two designers specialized in different categories—Le Maire became more famous for designing higher end specialty stores, and Loewy was heralded as the king of the middle class department store—both exhibited influence over the design trends of the retail trade during their tenure.

All of these individuals, Loewy, Le Maire, and Stewart, represented a new type of individual that assessed the needs of retail environments and made suggestions for how to meet those goals. These trained design professionals offered expertise beyond aesthetic guidance and helped create a new type of retail atmosphere—one that blended aesthetics and efficiency in the spirit of industrial design.

Almost all of the changes that took place during the mid-century stemmed from the development of scientific selling and visual merchandising. These trends relied on the idea that a buyer's actions could be predicted through consumer research. From the location of the store, to interior layouts and merchandise display, department stores and designers looked towards scientific studies to make decisions to propel higher volumes in sales. Department stores, and the retail trade in general, relied on visual merchandising to shape and direct the visual atmospheres of stores.

Again, the records of Raymond Loewy Associates illustrate this key development. The company's reports rooted store design in the theory of industrial design. The reports also set a precedent by considering retail spaces and consumer actions as part of a scientifically measurable group dynamic. The studies



hypothesized that retail spaces could be observed and researched to guide the final design towards a more beautiful and functional selling space. Loewy's reports, coupled with Dichter's consumer research and trade studies on merchandise display, encouraged the idea that a store's design could directly affect sales and increase profits.

The overall mindset related to visual merchandising, and the idea that the design of a store or of individual interior displays could significantly alter a store's profits, feeds back into the discussion of agency. As the science of selling became more accepted, the desire to hire trained and knowledgeable designers increased. The trade literature distilling and disseminating the conclusions of strategic studies also increased. Through trade magazines, journals, and textbooks, ideas regarding scientific selling spread beyond the firms preparing studies and reports to become core curriculum for students of retail design.

The J.C. Penney Company exemplifies the impact of visual merchandising and interior design on the evolution of a retail establishment. While the chain initially resisted earlier modernization efforts, by the 1960s the company learned how to employ the ideas of visual merchandising to create more modern stores that appealed to a larger group of suburban shoppers. The popular atmosphere developed by designers such as Loewy, became the "new look" that J.C. Penney incorporated into store designs. The company's delayed but well-timed move into the suburban landscape exemplified the impact that location, size, and merchandise display could have on sales.

While this dissertation makes significant contributions to understanding how mid-twentieth century department stores changed visually, who spearheaded those

changes, and how scientific selling informed patterns of consumption, a need exists for further research in several areas. The number of archival collections available for research limits this study. While I have consulted a number of strong collections to draw conclusions, the greatest struggle has been in finding collections that contain first-hand accounts regarding motivations for change. The Stanley Marcus Papers, The J.C. Penney Corporate Archives, and the Raymond Loewy Collection at the Library of Congress offered strong evidence for identifying and understanding the motivations driving store changes. Other collections, however, lacked personal papers and thus provided limited insights beyond images, fiscal reports, and press releases. For this reason, this study focuses on a small number of stores and limited set of individuals, using those stories to portray a larger historical narrative.

Understanding the financial impact of many of the decisions made by stores is also limited at times. While many stores suggested the accrual of rising profits in press coverage and year-end reports, it is difficult to ascertain the precise financial gains gleaned from specific design decisions. The assumption is also made that stores repeated financially successful actions.

There are many directions in which to extend this research in the future. Further research on how the changes in design presented in this work influenced the design aesthetic and expectations of shoppers is warranted. For example, examining the ways in which shoppers exposed to contemporary styling and convenience began to expect those qualities in other areas of their lives would provide remarkable insights into the diffusion of marketing and the development of cultural attitudes. Querying how the retail field in general reacted to these changes would provide new information about decision-making and societal influences on corporate behavior. It would also be

useful to extend this study to the service or entertainment industries to probe whether or not they experienced similar changes over time. Finally, on the level of domestic life, probing how home design reflected these new ideas of atmosphere and convenience would enhance this narrative.

Another viable path is to extend the timeline presented in this work and explore the decline of department stores. A myriad of questions remain. How did the mid-century design hallmarks continue to influence shopping in the late 1970s and into the 1980s? Did designers keep up with shoppers' expectations? How did box stores impact department store design? How did multi-store buyouts and changes in corporate structure affect the ways stores looked and operated? Future studies of this topic will help inform an understanding of the ways in which our current culture experiences shopping.

As the 1970s came to an end, retail trends circled back to turn-of-the-century theatricality to entice consumers. The mid-century changes in displays allowed for a new notion of retailing to develop, one that felt familiar and approachable. Perhaps as a reaction to the ways in which upscale and mid-level stores began to parallel design development in the 1960s, some companies revived the notion of spectacle as a marketing technique. In the 1970s, the *New York Times* claimed that this phenomenon had reignited the New York City retail trade, referring to the atmosphere of stores in general as a "theater." Focusing on the promotional events at the local Bloomingdale's, the paper explained:

These are not experiments engineered by display designers and public relations types who have, for a season, been handed the run of New York's department stores. They are, rather, the manifestations of a phenomenon that has been largely responsible for the biggest retailing boom in New York in 20 years. It is called "visual merchandising,"

and, in conjunction with status-conscious advertising, high-profile shopping bags and unconventional window displays, it has transformed the stodgy, family-oriented department store into a virtual amusement park. It may be an expensive and unscientific way of attracting customers, but it is an essential one...it is a survival tactic in a fiercely competitive era.<sup>388</sup>

Such theatrical, set-like, retail interiors can be linked directly to the 1970s idea of visual merchandising. Beyond just aligning with their “personality,” theatrical promotions helped shoppers have an entertaining experience while shopping. While *The New York Times* article failed to see the historical roots of the theatrical nature of department stores, it did address the power and prowess of these stores in the late-1970s, arguing that department stores were “suddenly emerging as news-making hybrids: part store, part theater, part center for continuing education.”<sup>389</sup> Though not really a “sudden” shift, the writer’s sentiments suggest that something new was happening in late-1970s department store retail spaces, even if pinpointing the roots of the phenomenon proved difficult. The author, however, did provide a new definition of entertainment and of public expectations characterizing the retail world, all born of renewed theatricality in display. While dormant during the mid-century, due to designers’ attempts to normalize shopping and allow it to be a daily affair, the guiding principles of the turn-of-the-century window dresser re-emerged once again to protect the department store from the fierce competition of the increasingly popular box store.

Still today a similar struggle for market definition exists in department stores. In the first few days of 2016, *The Business of Fashion*, an online publication

---

<sup>388</sup> Jesse Kornbluth, "The Department Store As Theater," *New York Times*, 29 April 1979, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/120900713?accountid=10457>.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid.

specializing in trend and commerce analysis, asked “What’s Next for the American Department Store.”<sup>390</sup> The author, Lauren Sherman, noted heightened competition among leading department stores as retailers including Neiman Marcus, Saks Fifth Avenue, and Macy’s reported a drop in earnings in the first quarter of the 2016 fiscal year.<sup>391</sup> The slowdown presents significant challenges for retailers, as executives race to discover a cure that will increase spending. Sherman describes the first problem to solve: how to get shoppers to physically shop in store, followed by the challenge of convincing shoppers to “stick around.”<sup>392</sup> While no solution seems to be a frontrunner, retail executives have tried upgrades and renovations to store appearance, reorganization of departments, special events, and opening locations in new burgeoning markets.

Though Sherman neglects to include a historical analysis, the 2016 story she tells echoes the sentiments of mid-century department store development, and a historical analysis may help contemporary executives see a clearer picture of their future. Currently undergoing a major renovation, Saks Fifth Avenue’s flagship store will soon include a juice bar, cocktail lounge, and trendy Parisian restaurant.

---

<sup>390</sup> Lauren Sherman, “What’s Next for the American Department Store,” *The Business of Fashion*, 3 January 2016, [http://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/intelligence/whats-next-for-the-american-department-store?utm\\_source=Subscribers&utm\\_campaign=bd44abb352-&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_d2191372b3-bd44abb352-418143401?utm\\_source=Subscribers&utm\\_campaign=bd44abb352-&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_d2191372b3-bd44abb352-418143401](http://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/intelligence/whats-next-for-the-american-department-store?utm_source=Subscribers&utm_campaign=bd44abb352-&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_d2191372b3-bd44abb352-418143401?utm_source=Subscribers&utm_campaign=bd44abb352-&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_d2191372b3-bd44abb352-418143401).

<sup>391</sup> Ibid.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid.

Presumably for the first time since this location opened in 1924, the cosmetics department will move to the second floor, while handbags and leather goods will “dominate the first floor.”<sup>393</sup> The layout changes, as chief executive Marc Metrick explains, place two of the strongest departments on the first two floors and give each more space. In addition to store events, the new amenities are meant to make the store “theater and entertainment.”<sup>394</sup> Metrick believes that all of these changes will draw shoppers to physically shop at Saks.

The redefinition of layout at Saks is reminiscent of how mid-century designers re-situated stores to cater more specifically to the needs to a new type of shopper—the suburban, middle-class consumer. Le Maire and Marcus selected merchandise tailored specifically to their local demographic and carefully laid out the floor plans to encourage movement at the Preston Center and NorthPark Neiman Marcus locations. Loewy acted similarly on a national spectrum with mid-level department stores, designing floor plans to expose shoppers to the most amount of merchandise possible, arranging merchandise to match shopping habits, and stocking aisles with “impulse buys.”

Just as Saks hopes to use amenities to draw shoppers into the space under the guise of entertainment, designers and store executive of the mid-century also competed to encourage more traffic at their stores by establishing the store as a community center, creating a haven for shoppers and inviting them into the store.

---

<sup>393</sup> Ibid.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid.

Another parallel with mid-century strategy: opening stores in new markets. In 2018 Nordstrom and Neiman Marcus will enter the New York City market for the first time after a long awaited property development, and this year Barneys New York will reposition itself with a new downtown flagship store. A defining tactic of mid-century department store development was the opening new stores in areas with strong representation of the target demographic. Where a new suburb developed, so too, did a new shopping mall. Batten's leadership at J. C. Penney illustrated how the company's aggressive expansion plan attracted more shoppers to frequent their local Penney's stores while simultaneously developing strong brand loyalty.

While retail executives in 2016 are closely considering store location, layout, look, and amenities, they identified merchandise offering and customer service as their main focus. Sherman writes, "Treating the shopping experience as entertainment can increase time spent in store. However, retailers believe that superior customer service and unique product are the true tenets of conversion."<sup>395</sup> The twenty-first-century shopper is different from her mid-century counterpart; it appears she has the tools to make her own informed purchasing decisions. Retailers today place the blame of dwindling department store sales on ecommerce. However, the core problem—excessive choice and oversaturation of goods—is not dissimilar to the mid-century department store market. While the mid-century consumer did not have ecommerce she was armed with excessive choice on where to shop, and made her decisions on store loyalty based on location and "personality."

---

395 Ibid.

The 2016 push for “unique product” offerings seems to build a more modern notion of personality using merchandise, as opposed to layout and design. Through restaurants, events, exhibitions, and nurturing of an identifiable culture, mid-century store planners and designers created spaces to which shoppers flocked. While executives knew only a few might actually purchase, they worked to build long-term relationships with shoppers. In the mid-century, tailored product offerings and stellar customer service were just a fragment of a retailer’s solution to increase visitor count. Perhaps, retail executives of today should look back at the competitive landscape of the mid-century and take note of how each store fought to establish their own as *the* place to spend the day.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alessandri, Sue Westcott. "Modeling Corporate Identity: A Concept Explication and Theoretical Explanation." *Corporate Communications* 6, no.4 (2001): 173-182, <http://0-search.proquest.com.ignacio.usfca.edu/docview/214190254?accountid=14674>.

Angel, Juvenal L. *Careers in Merchandising*. New York: World Trade Academy Press, 1958.

Bennett, Tony. *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. London: Routledge, 1995.

Benson, Susan Porter. *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores 1890-1940*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

Benson, Susan Porter. "Palace of Consumption and Machine for Selling: The American Department Store, 1880-1940," *Radical History Review* 21(Fall 1979): 99-221

Buckley, Jim. *The Drama of Display: Visual Merchandising and Its Techniques*. New York: Pellegrini & Cuhady, 1953.

*The Business Man's Library: Book on Selling: The Principles of the Science of Salesmanship; Methods and Systems of Selling in Various Lines.* Chicago-New York: The System Company, 1905.

California World's Fair Commission. *Final Report of the California World's Fair Commission: All Exhibits of the State of California.* Sacramento: State Office, 1894.

Carnegie, Dale. *How to Win Friends and Influence People.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1936.

Chevrolet Presents. "American Look (Part 1)." Filmed 1958.  
<https://archive.org/details/American1958>.

Cohen, Lizabeth. *A Consumer's Republic.* New York: Vintage Books, 2004.

Cowee, Howard M. *The Traffic-Readership and Sales Study of Display.* New York: Prentice-Hall, 1950.

Doss, Erika. "Toward an Iconography of American Labor: Work, Workers, and the Work Ethic in American Art, 1939-1945." *Design Issues* 13, no.1 (1997): 53-66.

- Duncan, Delbert, and Charles F. Phillips. *Retailing Principles and Methods*. Homewood, IL: R.D. Irwin, 1955.
- Edgar, A. E. "Modern Equipment, An Investment." *Inland Storekeeper* 6 (1913), 279-294.
- Esperdy, Gabrielle. *Modernizing Main Street*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Foner, Eric. *Give Me Liberty*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009.
- Goffman, Irving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Edinburgh: The University of Edinburgh, 1956.
- Goodall, Philippa. "Design and Gender: Where is the Heart of the Home?" *Built Environment* 16, no. 4 (1990): 269-278.
- Grand Rapids Showcase Company. *Getting Behind the Retail Business*. Grand Rapids, MI: Grand Rapids Showcase Company, 1920.
- Grier, Katherine C. *Culture and Comfort: Parlor Making and Middle-Class Identity, 1850 – 1930*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2013.
- Halberstam, David. *The Fifties*. New York: Villard Books, 1993.

Harris, Neil. *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Taste in Modern America*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Hartwick, Jeffrey. *Mall Maker: Victor Gruen, Architect of an American Dream*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.

Harvard University Bureau of Business Research. *The American Department Store: 1920-1960*. Cambridge: Harvard University Graduate School of Business, 1963.

Hawkins, E. R., and Carl E. Wolf, Jr. *Merchandise Display for Simplified Service in Department and Specialty Stores*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947.

Hayden, Delores. *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000*. New York: Vintage Books, 2003.

Henrion, Frederick and Alan Parkin. *Design Coordination and Corporate Image*. London: Studio Vista, 1967.

Iarocci, Louisa. "The Art of Draping': Window Dressing." In *Visual Merchandising: The Art of Selling*, edited by Louisa Iarocci, 137-156. Burlington: Ashgate, 2013.

- International Library of Technology. *Miscellaneous Merchandise Decorations: Collection of Artistic Display*. Scranton: International Textbook Company, 1905.
- Jackle, John, and Keith Sculle. *The Gas Station in America*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002.
- Jackson, Kenneth. *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Kaufmann, Edgar. *What is Modern Design?* New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1950.
- Kirkham, Pat. "Humanizing Modernism: The Crafts, 'Functioning Decoration' and the Eameses." *Journal of Design History* 11, no. 1 (1998): 15-29.
- Koerber, Jerome. *The Art of Draping*. Cincinnati: The Display Publishing Company, 1923.
- Kretschmer, Robert. *Window and Interior Display*. Scranton: Laurel Publishers 1952.
- Lapidus, Morris. *Too Much is Never Enough*. New York: Rizzoli, 1996.

Lazarus, Arthur. *Department Store Organization*. New York: Dry Goods Economist, 1926.

Leach, William. *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.

Leach, William. "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption: Women and Department Stores, 1890-1925." *The Journal of American History* 17, no. 2 (1984): 322-324, 325-326.

Levinson, Marc. *The Great A&P and the Struggle for Small Business in America*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2011.

Lewis, Roger. *The Art of Decorating Show Windows and Displaying Merchandise*. Chicago: The Merchants Record Company, 1924.

Loewy, Raymond. *Industrial Design*. New York: Overlook Books, 1979.

Longstreth Richard. *The American Department Store Transformed: 1920-1960*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.

Longstreth, Richard. "Sears, Roebuck and the Remaking of the Department Store, 1924-42." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 65, no. 2 (2006): 238-279.

Marcus, Stanley. *Minding the Store*. Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2001.

Mauger, Emily M. *Modern Display Techniques*. 7<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Fairchild Publications, 1976.

Mauran, J. L. "The Department Store Plan." *Brickbuilder* 17 (1908): 252-255.

McCauley, Zula. *Neiman Marcus: The First Fifty Years*. Dallas: Neiman Marcus, 1957.

Melewar, T. C., and John Saunders. "Global Corporate Visual Identity Systems: Using an Extended Marketing Mix." *European Journal of Marketing* 34.5, no. 6 (2000): 538-550.

Murrills, Howard Claude. *The New Practical Display Instructor*. London: Blandford Press, 1954.

National Retail Merchants Association. *Display Manual*. New York: NRDA Visual Merchandising Group, 1955.

Nelson, Edwin Leonard. *Teacher's Manual for Merchandising Display*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1954.

Neystrom, Paul. *Retail Selling and Store Management*. New York: Appleton, 1914.

Obinski, Monica. "Exhibiting Modernity through the Lens of Tradition in Gilbert Rohde's Design for Living Interior." *Journal of Design History* 20, no. 3 (2007): 227-242.

Obinski, Monica. "Selling Folk Art and Modern Design: Alexander Girard and Herman Miller's Textiles and Objects Shop (1961–1967)." *Journal of Design History* 28, no. 3 (2015): 254-274.

Parnes, Louis. *Planning Stores that Pay: Organic Design and Layout for Efficient Merchandising*. New York: F. W. Dodge Corp, 1948.

Pasdermajian, H. *The Department Store: Its Origins, Evolution and Economics*. London: Newman Books, 1954.

Plowman, Allan. *Fashion Display Illustrated*. London: Blandford Press, 1957.

Post, Emily. *Etiquette in Society, In Business, In Politics, and at Home*. New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1922.

Post, Emily. *The Personality of a House*. New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1930.



Rydell, Robert. *All the World's a Fair*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984.

Shanken, Andrew. *194X: Architecture, Planning, and Consumer Culture on the American Homefront*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

Smith, Daniella Olhad. "T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbings: Crafting a Modern Home for Postwar America." *Journal of Interior Design* 34, no. 1 (2008): 39-55.

Sparke, Penny. *An Introduction to Design and Culture, 1900 to the Present*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Sparke, Penny. *As Long as It's Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste*. London: Harper Collins, 1995.

Spigel, Lynn. *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Strasser, Susan. *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market*. New York City: Pantheon, 1989.

Susman, Warren. "'Personality' and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture." In *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, edited by John Higham and Paul K. Conkin, 212-226. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979.

Taylor, Frederick Winslow. *The Principles of Scientific Management*. New York: Harper Brothers, 1911.

Van Doren, Harold. *Industrial Design: A Practical Guide*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1940.

Virginia Department of Education. *Visual Merchandising: Display Techniques, Interior Display and Window Display*. Richmond: Distributive Education Service, 1956.

Westbrook, Robert B. "Abundant Cultural History: The Legacy of Warren Susman." *Reviews in American History* 13, no. 4 (1985): 481-486.

Wilson, Kristina. *The Modern Eye: Stieglitz, MoMA, and the Art of Exhibition, 1924-1935*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

Wingate, John Williams, and Elmer O Schaller. *Techniques of Retail Merchandising*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1956.