Retail Architecture:
The Design Problem That Cannot Be Ignored (any longer)

Laurel Bancroft
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The study of architecture consists, very simply, of the study of square footage, of inhabited areas, imagined areas, built areas, and rehabilitated areas. While this is an overly simplified statement, it is a useful quantitative measure of the constructed world. Thus, it follows, that in quantitative thinking, architects should want to delve into the space types that inhabit most of our constructed world's square footage. In the United States, constructed retail area per person totals 31 square feet. [1] This number should be optimistic for the architectural world, if one was to design retail; they have the opportunity to affect every American, and 31 square feet of their personal space. The total retail area in the United Stated consists of 8,313,575,000 square feet, a number not to be ignored. [2] Looking past the numbers, the extreme permeation of retail into our culture is impossible to disregard. One can assume that at one point in any American's life, they have entered a retail space, and, most likely, bought a product, entering the role of American consumer. While it is obvious that retail space is an inherent part of the American experience and culture, it is largely ignored by architects, leaving pure corporate development and marketing to the formation of a staggering eight million square feet of constructed space. This essay will outline the current complex world of retail architecture. First, inspecting the origination of the inherent disregard of

[1] International Council of Shopping Centers, "United States Fact Sheet," 09 Mar. 2010 <www.icsc.org/research>.
[2] International Council of Shopping Centers

retail space design by many architects, but also inspecting the few that have designed successful (or unsuccessful) retail architecture, their philosophy, and how it relates to complex social theory and urbanism. And finally, a topic that cannot be overlooked in the current economical climate, is the failure of retail space, and how these vacancies present a unique urban opportunity to all communities and architects.

As a student of architectural history, it is rare to study shopping malls, boutiques, and strip malls. Most study is based upon centers of "high culture" for example, museums, schools, and opera houses. As noted above, this is a concerning facet of high, theory-driven architecture, the obvious question becomes: why do many architects ignore retail space? Pure ignorance and apathy can be one explanation for this oversight. The CEO of Neiman Marcus, Stanley Marcus, blames an ignorance of the function of a store as a reason for the failure to merge between architecture and retail design, "Too many of them [architects] are built with preconceptions rather than basically studying how stores are done." [3] With this ignorance came a trend to instead of study retail space, its functions and faults, and optimize movement throughout, the architect would only bring high design to the envelope of the building, leaving the spatial organization of the store intact as the common typology, a completely open space. Marcus regards Edward Larabee Barnes' design for Neiman Marcus, "Barnes had never been in a store. His wife did all of the shopping, so he had no basic understanding of the economics…" This ignorant design approach is easily seen upon closer inspection of Erich

[3] Barbara Koerble, "Buy Design: Stanley Marcus on the Architecture of Merchandising," *CITE* (Fall 1996): 28-30.

Mendelsohn's *Schocken Department Store* (fig.1) Marcel Breur's De Bijenkorf (fig. 2) and Mies Van Der Rohe's *Dominion Center*, (fig. 3) while each has a distinctive material quality and envelope, the floor plan is extremely similar, completely open and symmetrical. [4] These shortcomings of retail design is a result of a lack of engagement with the problem, instead of intense research, space planning, and a true understanding of the retail world, the modern architects tried to engage in a world that was foreign to them, resulting in un-imaginative solutions to a complex and diverse problem.

These failures aside, there are a few architects that absorbed themselves in retail design, and have produced famous, if not successful projects as a result. The difference lies in how they have engaged with the retail design world. Daniel Burnham practicing in the early twentieth century, post- World War II architect, Victor Gruen and Jon Jerde, a contemporary practicing architect, have immersed their respective practices into the complex world of retail architecture. This complete immersion is not a result of an affinity towards shopping or consumerism, but a pragmatist approach to a medium for change. Using retail architecture as a constant in American culture, the architects studied below strive to construct urban utopias around this gravitational force within three distinct eras in American history.

First and foremost, Daniel Burnham, the 20th century architect known for his extensive urban planning of Chicago, Cleveland, Manila and others, also produced extensive retail architecture including, but not limited to *Selfridge* in London (fig. 4),

[4]Jeffrey, Inaba, et. al., *The Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping / Harvard Design School Project on the City 2*. (Köln: Taschen, 2002) 395.

Wanamaker in New York and Philadelphia (fig. 5), *Marshall Field's* in Chicago (fig. 6), *Alms & Doepke* in Cincinatti (fig. 7), *Filene's Department Store* in Boston (fig. 8), and *May Company* in Cleveland (fig. 9). The Philadelphia *John Wanamaker Store*, built between 1902 and 1911 was the largest retail building in the world at that time. The building was produced with Italian Renaissance detailing, clad in Maine granite, with clearly articulated Tuscan columns at the entrances, the building responds to its deeply historical and rich site across from Philadelphia City Hall. Burnham insisted that it demonstrated "the direct practical requirements of modern merchandizing." [5] The rectangular plan consists of a five-story sky-lit enclosed courtyard at the center of the building, with smaller halls dispersed throughout, including Greek and Egyptian Halls, and a Tea Room. While the interior is lavishly decorated to match the exterior, the opening ceremony was lavish on another level. Presenting at the opening ceremony, along with John Wanamaker and President Taft, Burnham asserted himself as a strong proponent of commerce stating merchants as the keepers of the destiny of America, "otherwise the organized life of society could not have gone on, for commerce is the heart of every community." [6] This daft businessman's interpretation of retail architecture seems at a polar opposite of Burnham's description of planning as "striving after the beautiful and useful laws God has created to govern his material Universe." [7] In *The Plan of Chicago (fig. 10)*, Burnham argued, "the city is for all, and that the role of the city is

[5] Kristen, Schaffer. *Daniel H. Burnham: Visionary Architect and Planner*. (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2003) 170.
[6] Schaffer, 172.
[7] Schaffer, 19.

to make the best citizens." [8] But, at a deeper level, Burnham's understanding of the beauty of the cityscape allowed him to also understand the role retail and commercialism played in the 20th century urban fabric. Without his conception of the city as a whole, it would be easy to write off retail architecture as trivial, compared to museums, opera houses, and transportation systems, all included in this Chicago plan.

Victor Gruen is often referred to as the "father of the shopping center." Gruen, originally born in Vienna, was a contemporary to the émigré architects that included van der Rohe, Gropius, and Breuer, and even though Gruen is not a household name such as the others listed above, his design is definitely of the everyday. Gruen delved into retail architecture upon arriving in America in the late 1930's, boasting theatrical lighting effects and storefronts to attract customers. Gruen believed that shopping was transformed into a social activity after the Depression, which involved not only buying products, but also being entertained in the process. Gruen's *Northland (fig. 11)*, built in 1954 in Southfield, a suburb of Detroit, Michigan, was the largest shopping center in the world. Its plan included over 100 retail stores along with a post office, restaurants, and auditoriums; it also included indoor and outdoor walkways and plazas.[9] Two years later, Gruen was invited to create a plan for the city of Fort Worth, Texas, and he drew national attention when he proposed to leave cars outside of the city to make the downtown more livable and pedestrian friendly (fig. 12). The un-built Fort Worth plan

[8] Schaffer, 184.

[9] Peter Siegrist, "Synopsis: Victor Gruen, Architect of an American Dream," 09, Mar. 2010, <landmarksociety.org>. 2.

encouraged "pedestrian-oriented shopping, cars were to be banned for a six-block section of the main street. To limit traffic congestion, a ring highway was proposed to circle downtown, with exits leading directly into parking garages."[10] Another innovative urban plan by Gruen was the Midtown Plaza, partially implemented in 1962. Similar to the Fort Worth Plan, Gruen modeled it after European cities and suggested keeping the cars out of the urban center, creating a pedestrian-friendly urban oasis. Once opened in 1962, *Architectural Forum* wrote "the first bulls-eye answer of an aging American center to the threat of the suburban shopping center." [11] According to Gruen, the aim of his mall designs was to create a "Europeanization of America." He believed that the mall liberated the car-addled suburbanite, and Americans would be forced to leave their "detached lives in detached houses." [12] Unfortunately, most of his designs strived for this, but achieved the opposite, spurring suburban sprawl and increasing dependency on cars and private transportation. Realizing his failure, Gruen complained that his designs failed as a result of impartial construction and insufficient funding. But, the common thread between his failed suburban malls and his utopic urban centers is his understanding of retail as a binding agent of an urban center. Thus allowing him to acknowledge retail design as an agent for change.

"In America the last vestiges of community are a parade, a football game and a shopping center," Jon Jerde, the architect of *Mall of America*, has created a

[10] Siegrist, 3.
[11] Peter Siegrist, "Synopsis: Victor Gruen, Architect of an American Dream," 09, Mar. 2010, <landmarksociety.org>. 2.
[12] Daniel Brook, "Gruen Nation," *Metropolis* 2003: 6. 100-102

reputation of creating "civic realms" via mixed-use, retail spaces.[13] As with Burnham and Gruen metioned above, Jerde is responsible for the largest constructed shopping center of his time, *Mall of America (fig. 13)*, built in 1992 in Bloomington, Minneapolis, it boasts 4.2 million square feet, containing more than 400 stores, 71 restaurants, a movie complex and a theme park. It is the epitome of design with the objective to seamlessly merge entertainment and retail. It was designed to be a world within a world, completely climate controlled as a response to the sometimes-arctic climate of Minneapolis, Minnesota. Not only can one go shopping in this environment, but they can also get an education (in the enclosed high school and college) and also get married at the Chapel of Love. Exact duplication of the St. Croix river banks are present, along with thousands of trees, and over a mile in skylights, to further emphasize the world within a world. The organization of the mall includes four major streets, corresponding to four major shopping districts which all merge at the 7 acre theme park in the center. These shopping districts imitate urban contexts such as upscale shopping district, trendy SoHo boutiques, etc. To break from the grid, the third and fourth levels of the mall are circular instead of rectangular. "These kinds of experiential complexities were necessary to bring some sense of a memorable geography: a walk through the project is four and a half miles long."[14] While some may argue that *Mall of America* is an exercise in city planning itself, Jerde also delves into the more traditional urban utopic planning. In collaboration with Ray Bradbury, a science-fiction writer best known for *Fahrenheit*

[13]Frances, Anderton. *You Are Here*. (London: Phaidon Press, 1999) 100.
[14]Frances, Anderton. *You Are Here*. (London: Phaidon Press, 1999) 100.

451, Jerde conceived *Horton Plaza* (fig. 14), a six block public space in downtown San Diego, completed in 1985. While many may argue that the plaza can be described as another mall, complete with retail shops and a movie theater, there is an innovation that is unique to this urban space, Jerde commands, "design shopping for citizens, not consumers."[15] Because of its urban location, *Horton Plaza* could rely on existing urban conditions as a catalyst for increasing communal acts. Instead of implementing the now-banal dumbbell plan of regional malls, Jerde created a curvilinear street, oscillating between narrow and wide, to create a unique user experience. This street acts a path between downtown and the waterfront and is modeled after an Italian hill town, or Venice, creating a strolling arcade. The most innovative feature of the *Horton Pla*za was the concentration of the design in the negative spaces, instead of the focusing on the building as objects, Jerde strived to achieve a sense of place in the uncontained urban environment.

Jerde states, "the shopping center is a pretty pathetic venue to deal with broadbased communalizing, but it is all we've got and it's the pump-primer in America." [16]This pragmatism can easily be seen by each of the architects listed above, an acceptance of the pervasive quality of retail in American culture, and taking advantage of the opportunity to make a enormous impact on it. Each architect's ability to grasp the urban quality of the major department store or shopping mall had the opportunity to completely alter a community (whether successful or not.)

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[15] Anderton, 15.

[16] Frances, Anderton. *You Are Here*. (London: Phaidon Press, 1999) 25.

While it is difficult to compare Burnham, Gruen, and Jerde because of the varying time periods of their work, all three share many common threads. They all idealized their projects as urban nodes, an origin point for growth, synthesis, and renewal within a larger context, rejecting the Modernist ideal of building as object. Their strong link between utopic urbanism and retail architecture can not be ignored, as each used these ideals to create their social design intentions, by using shopping as a medium, each could get their message of community out into the public. Another obvious thread that all three of these architects have in common, is that they designed and constructed the biggest retail venue of their era. "Reilly's Law of Retail Gravitation posits that, all other factors being equal, shoppers will patronize the largest shopping center they can get to easily." [17] Burnham said of the *Wanamaker Department Store,* "[it is] the most monumental structure ever erected in the world."[18] Over one hundred years later, Jerde says of his *Mall of America,* "What they wanted was four malls bolted end to end, so it was a piece of shit. … This isn't a shopping mall anymore. This is generically something else. This is a strange new animal here that, if you learn to do it right, could be off-the-wall, I mean really fucking great."[19] Because of its sheer size, these retail architects were destined to be famous no matter what the original design intention. While many critics view these architects (namely Gruen and Jerde, and sometimes Burnham) as lowbrow or even

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[17] Margaret Crawford, "The World in A Shopping Mall," *Variations on a Theme Park,* ed. Michael Sorkin (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 20.

[18] Thomas S. Hines*, Burnham of Chicago: Architect and Planner* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 303.

[19] Jeffrey, Inaba, et. al., *The Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping / Harvard Design School Project on the City 2*. (Köln: Taschen, 2002) 533.

developers, it is hard to ignore their impact on built architecture in America, whether it was socially progressive or repressive.

New criticism for the shopping mall and retail architecture is now appearing due to the desertion of these huge buildings as a consequence of the current economic crisis, planned obsolescence, and the aging of the regional shopping mall boom in the 1960's. Even in the early 1990's the shopping mall was faltering, "The average time shoppers spent in malls dropped by half from 1980 to 1990." [20] Now in 2010, almost 20% of the 2000 largest malls in the United States are failing. [21] The result is thousands of empty shells littering the American landscape, but what is the solution? Because the mall has grown to become an iconic symbol of American culture, it is often disconcerting to many Americans when their local mall becomes obsolete, (maybe a point of evidence that these malls do encourage some community, if not ideal, as Gruen and Jerde posited) but the empty shells of the mid-century malls offer unique opportunities at a second try for community, in the true spirit of Gruen. To avoid repeating the mistakes of the 1950's each community is repositioning these malls into key assets for their unique communities, as opposed to the cookie-cutter mall that was originally built or developed. Advantages of reusing these malls include its already existing infrastructure and it is usually located on major transportation routes.

These vacant malls are being redeveloped into more sustainable programs that match the demographics of the area, including community college classrooms,

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[20] Greg Hassell, "Malls Slipping as Shopping Meccas," Houston Chronicle, 9 Oct. 1996, 1.

[21] Redell, Charles. "Dead Malls." *Sustainable Industries*. N.p., 3 Mar. 2009. Web. 8 Mar. 2010. <http://sustainableindustries.com>.

senior living facilities, non-profit business hubs, churches, etc. By learning from the mistakes of the past, designers realize that these new retrofitted neighborhood centers need to be linked to existing neighborhoods not only through street design, but also through public transit and walking and bike paths. [22] Victor Gruen's *Northgate* mall mentioned above has also been transformed into a more demographically-specific lifestyle center. Not only has it become a lifestyle center renovated with more green space, plazas, restaurants, and housing, the renovation has also restore a creek which was originally piped in Gruen's original design.[23] The newly renovated *Thornton Place (fig. 15)* will be one of the first Leadership in Energy and Environment Development – Neighborhood Development (LEED-ND) certified communities in the United States. Thus, Gruen's utopian community concept has come full circle, building upon his idea of retail as binding agent, *Northgate Mall* was renovated into *Thornton Place*, a retail program inside a lifestyle infrastructure, reacting specifically to the needs and demographics of the community.

Northgate Mall's transformation into *Thornton Place* is a true example of embracing retail architecture as a constant in American culture, and using this constant to create a meaningful social impact. While retail architecture has been ignored by many architects, it is a relentless aspect of American culture and entertainment, and also the capitalist economy. Burnham, Gruen, and Jerde embraced this fact and used their retail architecture as a means to create

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[22] "101 Uses for A Deserted Mall," *New York Times* (New York) 08 Mar. 2010. 1.
[23] [23] Redell, Charles. "Dead Malls." *Sustainable Industries*. N.p., 3 Mar. 2009. Web. 8 Mar. 2010. <http://sustainableindustries.com>.

community in a larger social, urban context. While some were more successful than others, each architect made a huge impact on every American's lives. As the shopping mall typography slowly reaches obsolescence, a new opportunity arises for architects and designers in the 21st century. By embracing the opportunity retail architecture produces, and learning from their predecessors, the new solution to the complex social issue of retail architecture is slowly emerging and will no longer be ignored.

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Figures:

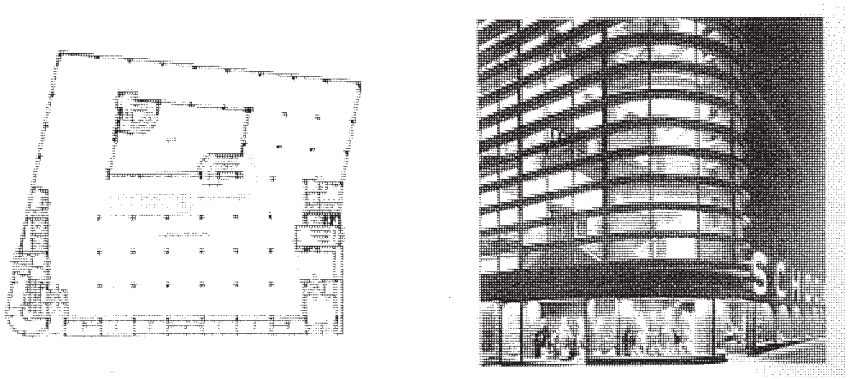

Figure 1. Schocken Department Store, Mendelsohn
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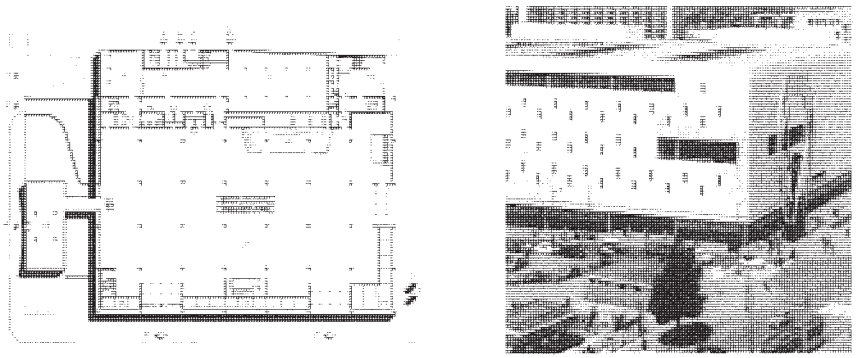

Figure 2. De Bijenkorf, Breur
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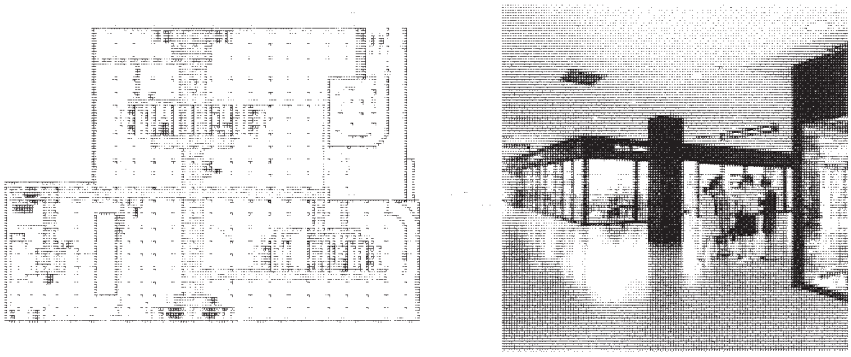

Figure 3. Dominion Center, van der Rohe
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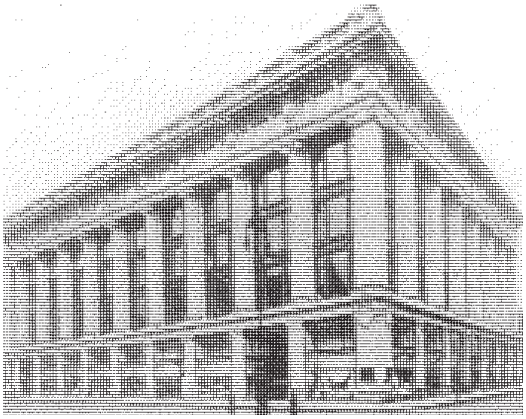

Figure 4. Selfridge Department Store, London, Burnham
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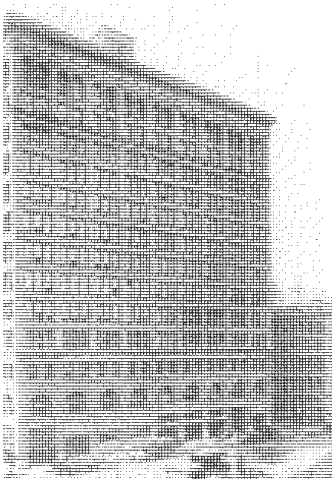

Figure 5a. John Wanamaker, New York, Burnham
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Figure 5b. Wanamaker Store, Philadelphia, Burnham
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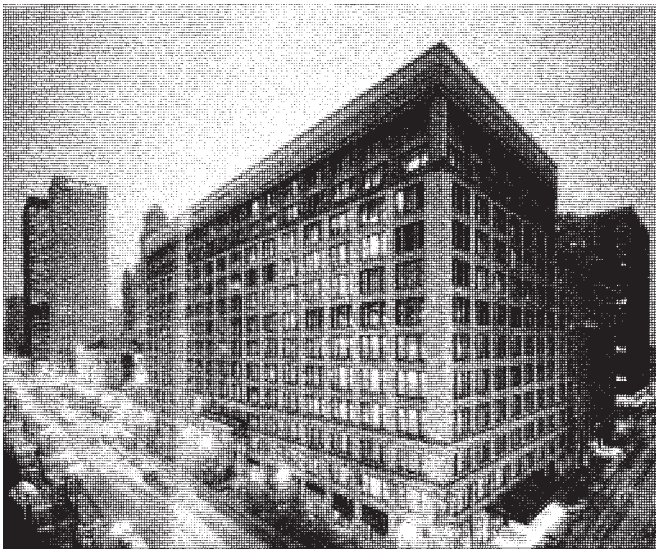

Figure 6. Marshall Field's Chicago, Burnham
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Figure 7. Alms and Doepke, Cincinnati, Burnham
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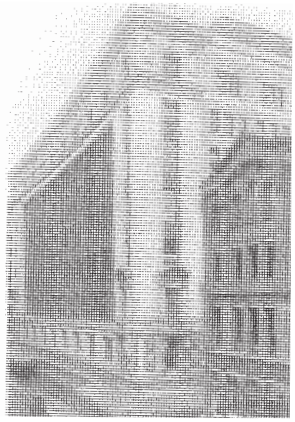

Figure 8. Filene's Department Store, Boston, Burnham
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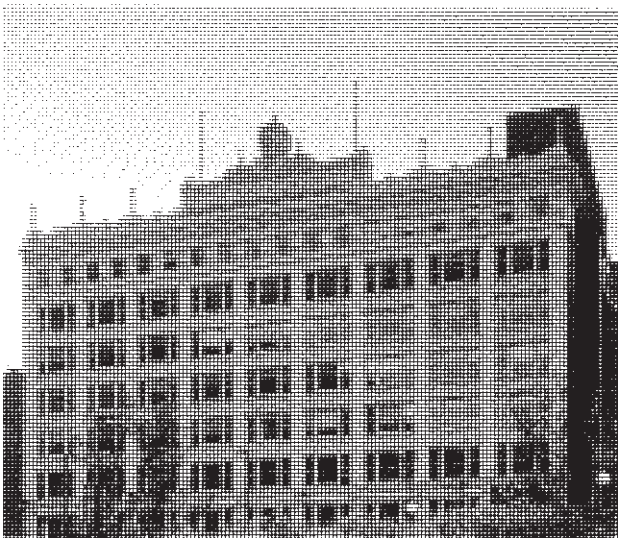

Figure 9. May Company, Cleveland, Burnham
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Figure 10. Plan of Chicago, Burnham
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Figure 11. Northland Shopping Center, Gruen
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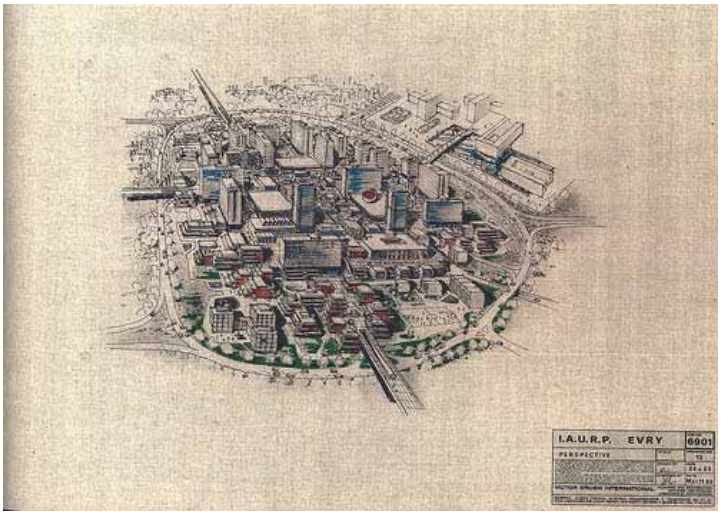

Figure 12. Evry France (Similar to Fort Worth Plan), Gruen
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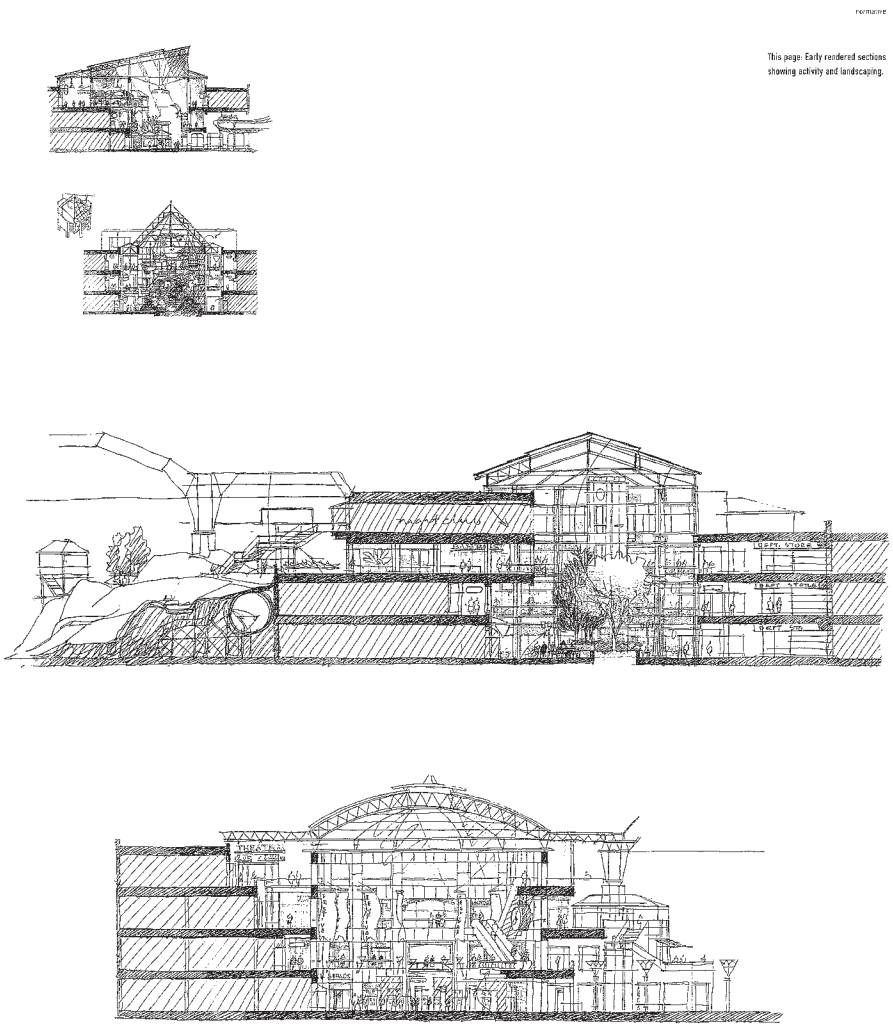

Figure 13. Mall of America, Jerde
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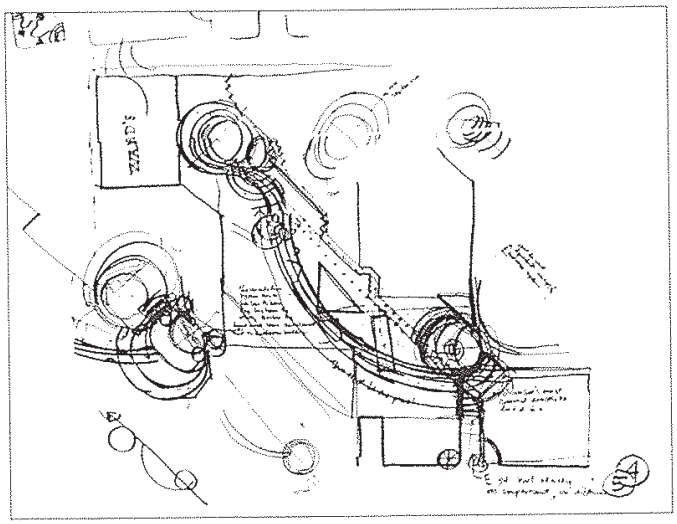

Figure 14. Horton Plaza, Jerde
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Figure 15. Thornton Place
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