

Mall Maker: Victor Gruen, Architect of an American Dream. *By M. Jeffrey Hardwick.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. 268 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, \$29.95. ISBN 0-812-23762-5.

Reviewed by Richard Longstreth

Victor Gruen should rank among the most important American architects for the business historian. He was one of the first to immerse himself in the intricacies of retailing and then seek dramatically new environments to improve the retail business. Much as Albert Kahn had done with the staffs of Henry Ford and other automobile manufacturers in revolutionizing large-scale production plants beginning in the early decades of the twentieth century, the Los Angeles-based Gruen sought to reinvent the marketplace based on the changing demands of his clients. Like Kahn, Gruen accomplished this goal several times—first with the store, then with the regional shopping center, and finally with the downtown business district. But in contrast to most of Kahn's work, Gruen's designs enjoyed the limelight of the public realm. Few architects matched his impact on postwar landscapes that affected everyday life and also symbolized the ambient newness of the era.

Aside from a pioneering article by Howard Gillette (*Journal of the American Planning Association*, autumn 1985) and some discussion of his work in southern California by myself (*City Center to Regional Mall*, 1997), scholarly examination of Gruen in print has been meager. Jeffrey Hardwick's study, focusing on Gruen's career in the United States, from his arrival in 1938 to his return to Europe thirty years later, is particularly welcome under the circumstances. Drawing extensively from the enormous quantity of writings and publicity Gruen generated and from selected papers in two archival collections, Hardwick presents an engaging, informative overview. Well organized and eminently readable, the text allows for a quick grasp of a multifaceted career. With admirable conciseness, Hardwick gives an insightful picture of Gruen's changing, and sometimes conflicted, intentions; of the salient qualities that distinguish major examples of his work; and of the reception it was accorded in the press. The results

are likely to make this a valuable source for historians—of business as well as of architecture and urbanism—for some time to come.

Yet the book does not effectively convey how the edgy nature of Gruen's approach to design could generate tensions with his clients and others in the business community. Hardwick offers sound critical analysis; however, because his sources are for the most part those Gruen helped create, the picture remains incomplete. The acrimonious end of an eight-year relationship in the 1940s with the California-based Grayson-Robinson chain of apparel stores is discussed, for example. What is not mentioned is that a number of southern California real-estate and retail executives perceived Gruen's work for Grayson as extravagant and of little value for effective merchandising. That sentiment could only have been reinforced with Gruen's design for Milliron's first branch department store (1947–49). Among the large emporia in downtown Los Angeles, Milliron's ranked among the lowest in status. It was also in financial straits; company leaders hoped the branch would save the business and no doubt applauded the attention-getting scheme that Gruen devised for his initial foray into department-store design. The novelty of the scheme, coupled with its iconic use of car ramps, gave it more publicity than any other retail facility of the period. Yet the interior layout was riddled with problems that disoriented customers and hampered the staff. These shortcomings became especially well known in retail circles after Milliron's closure and the purchase of the building in 1950 by The Broadway, one of the region's biggest department-store companies. As a result, the "Mall Maker" received almost no further retail commissions of consequence in the region over the next decade. To bolster his reputation, Gruen had to turn elsewhere.

That opportunity emerged in the late 1940s, when Gruen convinced Oscar Webber, president of Detroit's venerable J. L. Hudson Company, to have him explore ideas for branch-store development. Gruen's claim, accepted by Hardwick, that he persuaded Webber to shift from a staunch no-branch policy in order to build the nation's two largest branches is indicative of the architect's insatiable ego but is dubious in the light of how such prominent retailers operated. Whatever the circumstances, Hudson's department store became a major client. But Gruen almost blew it a third time. His initial scheme for Hudson's Eastland Shopping Center (1950) was so ungainly that it would

have ruined his reputation for good and caused acute embarrassment to the client had it been realized. Building restrictions during the Korean War saved the day. During that period, Gruen (or was it someone from Hudson's?) began to realize the implications of the scheme (unfortunately not illustrated in this book) and rethought the entire concept. On the second round, the results were stunning. Hudson's Northland (1952–54) became one of the most heralded of the early regional shopping malls and launched its architect on a fast-accelerating career as a kingpin of commercial design.

But even when he became an acknowledged leader in the design of regional malls, Gruen came under attack from those with opposing viewpoints. He strenuously advocated his commitment to the shopping center as a focus of community, a vibrant place, filled with human interaction, enlivened by art, landscaping, vendors, meeting facilities, and other features inspired by recollections of his native Vienna. Hudson's and a number of other retailers around the country embraced his vision. So did some developers, most notably James Rouse, who was profoundly affected by Gruen's perspective—a relationship noted, but regrettably not explored, in the text. Many other retailers argued for a more pragmatic approach, oriented solely toward efficient merchandising. Some of Gruen's colleagues concurrently built their careers on regional malls that met this more austere objective. The leaders among them were Seattle-based John Graham, whose Spartan design for Northgate (1948–50) helped set the industry standard, and Welton Becket from Los Angeles, who captured much of the regional trade denied Gruen and soon became prolific nationwide.

Gruen would have loved nothing more than to be the sole center of attention, as Hardwick allows him to be, but the Mall Maker was part of a more complex and difficult scene in which the seemingly casual, effortless environments for middle-class consumerism were created during the two decades after the Second World War.

*Richard Longstreth is professor of American studies at George Washington University. He has written extensively on twentieth-century retail development in the United States. His current book is The Department Store Transformed, 1920–1960, to be published by The Johns Hopkins University Press.*