

JULY 2018 / VOL. 108 NO. 7  
US \$7 CAN \$9

**LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE MAGAZINE**

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN  
SOCIETY OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS

# THE BEIGE HOLE

London landscapes  
in service of global capital

## CLIMATE AND PRESERVATION

Rigid standards versus future flux

## CRESCENT PARK

Riverfront ambitions in New Orleans

## VICTOR GRUEN

A memoir of ideals and regrets



## DREAMS AND REGRETS

### SHOPPING TOWN: DESIGNING THE CITY IN SUBURBAN AMERICA

BY VICTOR GRUEN, EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY ANETTE BALDAUF;  
MINNEAPOLIS: UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS, 2017;  
325 PAGES, \$29.95.

REVIEWED BY KELLY COMRAS, FASLA



Victor D. Gruen (1903–1980) was one of the most influential architects of the 20th century, a powerful visionary who combined social criticism, persuasive charm, ambition, and talent. Known as the father of the shopping mall, he envisioned a cure for the banality of postwar American suburbia and neglected city centers that profoundly altered the landscape of postwar city development. He suggested “shopping towns,” new community centers that would contain a rich mix of civic and commercial spaces and activities, and the introduction of pedestrian zones within the core of older city centers. Later in life, he criticized that his ideas had been co-opted by developers, commercialized by economic, political, and cultural forces beyond his control, which thereby emerged on the postwar landscape as an unintended archetype: the enclosed, inward-facing, single-purpose, multilevel, two-anchor-department-store shopping center.

Gruen has left us with an impressive number of writings about his work (including the well-known *The Heart of Our Cities*), and two pertinent books have tackled appraisals of his work—Alex Wall’s *Victor Gruen: From Urban Shop to New City* (2005) and M. Jeffrey Hardwick’s *Mall Maker: Victor Gruen, Architect of an American Dream* (2004). But Anette Baldauf’s new translation from German of Gruen’s dictated memoirs, *Shopping Town*, presents us with the rare opportunity to read this icon’s own end-of-life account and assessment of his legacy. In her preface, Baldauf provides a fascinating account

of her discovery of Gruen’s memoirs (housed in the Library of Congress) and explores the context of consumerism and suburbanization during the postwar era in which he worked.

Gruen’s memoir is a combined autobiography and account of his perceptions about architecture, urban planning, and the environment. Born Viktor David Grünbaum in 1903, Gruen grew up in an upper-middle-class Jewish family in the city of Vienna. He played a prominent role in the socialist youth movement in the early 1920s and was part of a radical cultural environment that sought social change. From 1926 to 1934 he became deeply involved in the Political Cabaret, a theatrical troupe that wrote and performed political satire as a form of social critique. During this time Gruen developed a successful architectural practice remodeling apartments and designing shop fronts and interiors, and he began thinking about what role architecture might play in “the development of a community and creative life.”

After Nazi Germany’s annexation of Austria in 1938, Gruen and his first wife, Alice (Lizzie) Kardos, fled to the United States. Once there, he kept his promise to fellow Political Cabaret refugees and resurrected their Viennese theater group on Broadway in New York. The Viennese Refugee Artists Group was a success, but Gruen’s first architectural commission in America, a design for the Lederer store on Fifth Avenue in 1939, had recently drawn praise and shown Gruen that “there



**ABOVE**  
Victor Gruen  
in 1946 with a  
model for Milliron's  
department store  
in Los Angeles.

was a lack of individuality, originality, and inventiveness in the field of retail and commercial construction." He determined to pursue architecture.

Over the next decade Gruen partnered with the talented interior designer Elsie Krummeck. They married and relocated to Los Angeles, where they worked together on 11 branches of the California clothing chain Grayson's, then went on to design a number of department stores for R. H. Macy's, Joseph Magnin, and Milliron's, and commercial buildings for Tishman. Their business flourished, owing in part to innovations contributed by Krummeck, including an original submission to *Architectural Forum* in 1943 for a grand interpretation of a future postwar city. By 1948 they had two children, and Krummeck was less involved with their practice. The marriage foundered. Gruen continued exploring ideas about the possibilities of designing an all-encompassing city plan. He realized he would

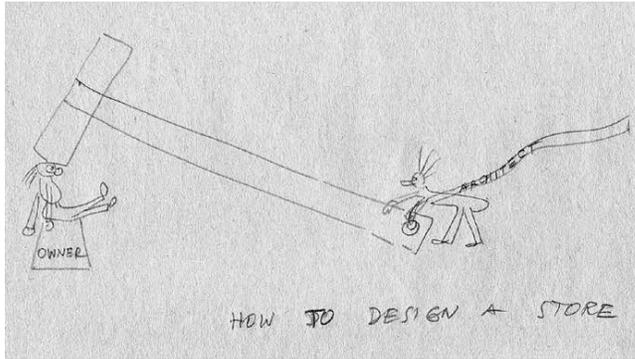
**INSTEAD OF CREATING  
COHESIVE COMMUNITIES,  
HIS IDEALISTIC VISION  
FOR THE SHOPPING MALL  
ULTIMATELY FAILED ITS  
ORIGINAL INTENT.**

need to build his business to include an interdisciplinary team of architects, planners, engineers, artists, and business professionals who would work together, and he began looking for an extraordinary client who could make his ideas possible. In the early 1950s he designed an open-air shopping center called Northland near Detroit for J. L. Hudson's. The center was conceived as a core for surrounding homes, offices, hotels, and shops. All were to be developed under the control of Hudson's, including strict tenant controls and installation of original sculpture to assure a look of quality. Gruen also advocated for cooperative arrangements with local transportation authorities to improve traffic. All amenities were designed to improve the quality of life for residents in the surrounding suburban areas.

Gruen's next project, Southdale, became his most famous. Developed by the Dayton brothers, this was a fully enclosed, climate-controlled, indoor shopping center with 72 shops and two anchor department stores. Plentiful parking surrounded the center. The exterior of the building was without windows, and all activity was focused inward. Stores were located on two levels with escalators, which densified the shopping experience. A central garden courtyard was flooded with natural light from upper north-facing windows, making it possible to plant large trees. A goldfish pond, an aviary, and a garden café further enhanced the area. Public reception was sensational. But within a decade Gruen ruefully acknowledged that what had once been a "new building type...became common worldwide."

Gruen saw the suburban shopping mall become ubiquitous. In the fifth chapter of his memoir he analyzed the reasons why: Instead of creating cohesive communities, his idealistic vision for the shopping mall ultimately failed its original intent.

COURTESY GRUEN ASSOCIATES



HIS WIVES WERE A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION AND SUPPORT FOR HIS PROFESSIONAL AMBITIONS.

**ABOVE**  
Victor Gruen's whimsical sketch of the architect/client relationship, 1959.

**BELOW**  
Elsie Krummeck and Victor Gruen in Los Angeles, circa 1941.



He criticized developers for co-opting his original ideas and deleting noncommercial space, making malls into selling machines. He came to see these single-purpose centers, taking up great swaths of land and wholly dependent upon automobiles, as an environmental sacrifice. He also realized that suburban malls actually hastened decentralization and fragmentation of the city centers, and blamed developers for building “gigantic shopping malls on the outskirts of cities [that] have made the city centers into empty shells.” And so he turned his efforts to a reexamination of urban renewal, laying out a core group of principles based upon memories of his beloved Vienna. In the first of these plans, for the city of Fort Worth, Texas, these principles included the removal and rerouting of automobile traffic from the city core to either underground or concentric ring roads surrounding the core; the repurposing of land in the core, which had previously been devoted to the automobile, to add amenities such as parks, squares, and promenades; and the introduction of local and express public transportation that would radiate out in all directions. Gruen included an

analysis of the likelihood of successful revitalization based upon a comparison of actual projects within democratic, autocratic, and communist political systems (the United States, Iran, and Russia) and was forced to conclude that each project was subject to financial, political, and public input in varying degrees. None worked perfectly well. While the weight of his disillusionment was palpable, his ideas concerning revitalization to invigorate moribund city centers remained influential,

and some of his projects, such as Faneuil Hall in Boston, were unquestionably successful.

As his retirement in 1968 from Victor Gruen Associates neared, Gruen “declared war on the automobile.” He saw that fragmented cities necessitated the proliferation of individual car ownership. As an architect who valued “fine-grained integration,” he made the case for reducing this “forced mobility.” He also became an advocate for the architect’s place in environmental planning and established a foundation to further public education about this then-new concept. The foundation’s work and his consulting activities refocused in Europe, and he returned to live in Vienna until his death in 1980.

Gruen describes his autobiographical record as an ergography (from the Greek *ergos*), an accounting of his work. To the extent that his memoir focused on his career, Baldauf wisely saw fit to include a supplemental chapter written by his son, Michael Gruen, which reveals personal and family details that link his father’s private and professional life. In an additional chapter, his daughter, Peggy Gruen, writes a gentle defense against Gruen’s harsh representations of her mother, Elsie Krummeck, Gruen’s partner and second wife, raising issues that Baldauf identifies as “delicate questions about the erasure of women from dominant storytelling—and from history books.” In 1962, Gruen’s third wife, Lazette van Houten, died suddenly. He married his fourth wife, Kemija Salihefendic, the following year. Gruen’s ergography lets us know that his marriages were intimately bound up in his working process and that his wives were a source of inspiration and support for his professional ambitions. But, as was his intent, the priority his memoir gives to his work leaves many unanswered questions about the individual roles each of his wives played in the development of his career.

COURTESY GRUEN ASSOCIATES, TOP; COURTESY PEGGY GRUEN, BOTTOM



**LEFT**  
An architectural model of Gruen's Northland Center. The mall, built in Southfield, Michigan, opened in 1954.



**RIGHT**  
An interior view of Gruen's Southdale Center mall in Edina, Minnesota, circa 1957.

Baldauf probes the myriad forces that shaped Gruen's approach to architecture in her concluding chapter, "Consumed?" Given Gruen's intelligence, talent, and humanitarian intentions, her careful analysis provides us with the context to understand the unintended consequences of his creation. She traces his early successes in the design of retail stores with arcades, transparency, and theatrical lighting where "he defined retail space as performance space," and she reminds us of his commitment to the theater, which provided him a forum to expose discrepancies between social ideals and realities. We come to understand that a rich fabric of prewar urban life in Vienna propelled Gruen to search for a similar sense of place in his new American home, a place that offered the pedestrian an experience of intimacy, cultural variety, and diversity of activities. And we learn how the translation of those ideals collided with postwar consumerism, fetishization of the automobile, suburbanization, racial segregation, gender isolation, and the disintegration of inner cities. Noting that critics now call the shopping mall "the death knell of the city," Baldauf rightly wonders why the archetype remains so popular and concludes that these malls of "containment, control, and consumerism" provide shoppers the opportunity to see and be seen and may provide opportunities for limited social interaction.

The timing of Baldauf's publication of *Shopping Town* could not have been more apposite. The shopping mall as a major element within our collective cultural landscape is currently experiencing a significant reexamination. This reassessment comes at a time when cities are reprioritizing commitments

to public transit, and grappling with issues surrounding the hardening of income stratification, such as affordable housing and housing for the homeless.

Baldauf's translation allows us to see the intelligence, talent, and humanitarian intentions that Gruen brought to his original ideas about how to create vibrant civic and commercial spaces. These ideas, along with his analysis of the failures of imperfectly implemented plans and unintended consequences of his creation, are worth careful study. We should pay special attention to Gruen's advocacy for "fine-grained integration" as we embark upon a reevaluation of the role of the shopping mall because the news is not all bad. Public reaction to the closure of a local mall in a *Los Angeles Times* headline, for example, recently proclaimed, "Once L.A.'s hottest mall, the Westside Pavilion is dying, and shoppers are bummed" (italics added). This smaller shopping mall is manufactured private commercial space, and it is a long way from Gruen's idealistic memories of urban prewar Vienna, but it is located within walking distance from several surrounding neighborhoods, includes community amenities, and is adjacent to a diverse mix of commercial shops, restaurants, and a large park. Dismayed supporters say that the mall functions as a cohesive center, and they charge that this valuable community asset is being lost. They might be right. And if they are, so was Victor Gruen. ●

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