

NOMINATION OF HISTORIC BUILDING, STRUCTURE, SITE, OR OBJECT
PHILADELPHIA REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION

SUBMIT ALL ATTACHED MATERIALS ON PAPER AND IN ELECTRONIC FORM ON CD (MS WORD FORMAT)

1. ADDRESS OF HISTORIC RESOURCE (must comply with a Board of Revision of Taxes address)

Street address: **1020-1024 Market Street**

Postal code: **19107**

Councilmanic District: **1st District**

2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: **Robinson Store**

Common Name: **Robinson Store**

3. TYPE OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

☒ Building

☐ Structure

☐ Site

☐ Object

4. PROPERTY INFORMATION

Condition: ☐ excellent ☒ good ☐ fair ☐ poor ☐ ruins

Occupancy: ☒ occupied ☐ vacant ☐ under construction ☐ unknown

Current use: Retail

5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

SEE ATTACHED

6. DESCRIPTION

SEE ATTACHED

7. SIGNIFICANCE

Period of Significance (from year to year): **1946-1964**

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: **1946**

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: **Gruen & Krummeck**

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: **Judson Studios (mosaic glass)**

Original owner: **Grayson-Robinson, Inc.**

Other significant persons:

CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION:

The historic resource satisfies the following criteria for designation (check all that apply):

- ☐ (a) Has significant character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth or Nation or is associated with the life of a person significant in the past; or,
- ☐ (b) Is associated with an event of importance to the history of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,
- ☒ (c) Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style; or,
- ☐ (d) Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style or engineering specimen; or,
- ☒ (e) Is the work of a designer, architect, landscape architect or designer, or engineer whose work has significantly influenced the historical, architectural, economic, social, or cultural development of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,
- ☐ (f) Contains elements of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship which represent a significant innovation; or,
- ☐ (g) Is part of or related to a square, park or other distinctive area which should be preserved according to an historic, cultural or architectural motif; or,
- ☐ (h) Owing to its unique location or singular physical characteristic, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community or City; or,
- ☐ (i) Has yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in pre-history or history; or
- ☒ (j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

8. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

SEE ATTACHED

9. NOMINATOR

Name with Title: **Benjamin Leech, consultant**

Email: **bentleech@gmail.com**

Organization: **Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia**

Date: **February 17, 2016**

Street Address: **1608 Walnut Street, Suite 804**

Telephone: **(215) 546-1146**

City, State, and Postal Code: **Philadelphia, PA 19103**

Nominator ☐ is ☒ is not the property owner.

PHC USE ONLY

Date of Receipt: _____

☐ Correct-Complete ☐ Incorrect-Incomplete

Date: _____

Date of Notice Issuance: _____

Property Owner at Time of Notice

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Postal Code: _____

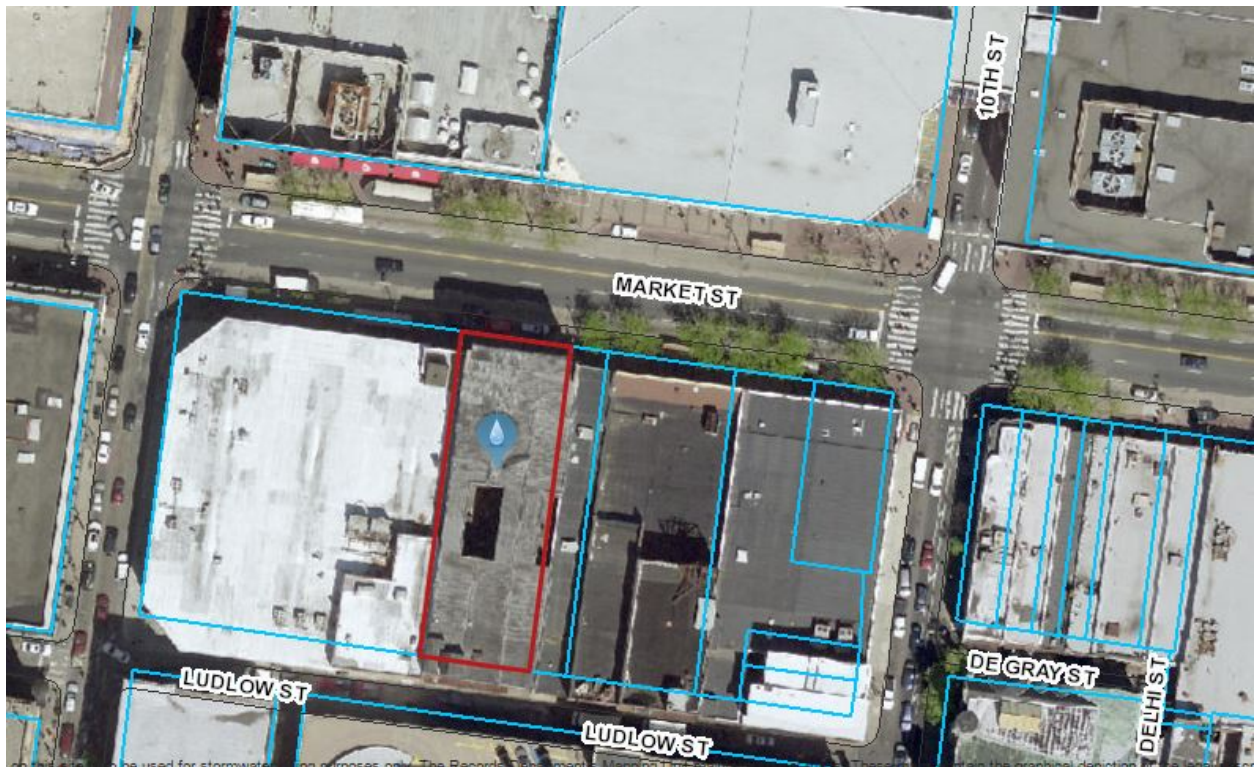
Date(s) Reviewed by the Committee on Historic Designation: _____

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: _____

Date of Final Action: _____

☐ Designated ☐ Rejected

3/16/07



5. Boundary Description

Situate on the South Side of Market Street, at the distance of 156 feet Eastward from the East Side of 11th Street, containing in front or breadth, on said Market Street, 61 feet and extending of that width in length or depth southward between parallel lines with the said 11th Street, 180 feet, to the north side of Ludlow Street. (per Deed #50660653, 09/26/2001)

6. Description

The former Robinson Store is a five-story commercial structure standing mid-block on the south side of the 1000 block of Market Street, in the Market East commercial district of Center City Philadelphia. The building occupies the full 60-foot width and 180-foot depth of its parcel, which includes frontage on both Market Street and Ludlow Street. While the structure itself dates to the 1880s, its most prominent feature is its main Market Street facade, a major alteration designed by architects Victor Gruen and Elsie Krummeck in 1946 for the Grayson-Robinson Company chain of retail womenswear. This alteration involved the complete demolition and replacement of the building's original nineteenth-century front elevation with a modern five-story shopfront design. For the purposes of this nomination, this north elevation constitutes the property's primary character-defining feature [Fig. 1].

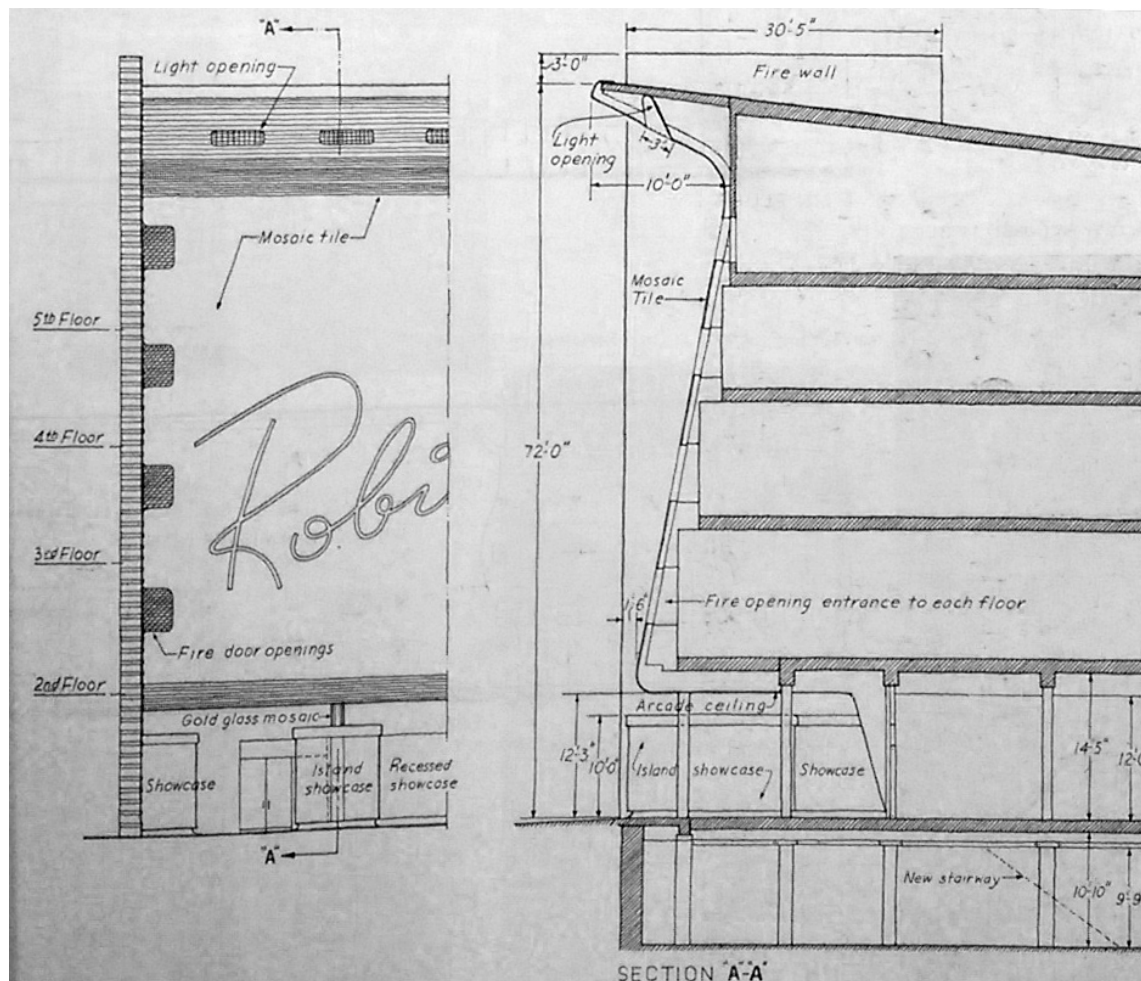


Figure 1: Original elevation and section (Architectural Forum, July 1947).

Clad entirely in a curtain-like field of purple glass mosaic tesserae, the dramatic, windowless facade slopes inward as it rises the building's full height before curving outward to terminate in a simple folded cornice [Fig. 2]. The soffit-like face of this projecting S-shaped fold features a row of large rectangular grills; these originally housed mercury-arc lamps that illuminated the facade and its original neon script "Robinson" sign (no longer extant). Rounded rectangular voids along each edge of the facade were designed for emergency fire access. The facade is bracketed by two slender concrete piers with incised horizontal "speedline" banding; these end walls originally featured inward-facing neon "Robinson" signs, one of which currently survives in place [Fig. 3]. At pedestrian level, the base of each pier also features a small but distinctive "Robinson" inscription in a delicate san-serif font [Fig. 4], and "Robinson" signage also survives in vestiges of the original terrazzo vestibule floor. Originally, the mosaic tile facade also curved inward to form the ceiling of a recessed shopfront arcade, further accentuating the continuous wave-like effect of the facade plane [Fig. 6]. Unfortunately this effect has been somewhat compromised by the installation of contemporary storefronts, security gates and box signs in place of the building's original ground-floor arcade and freestanding display boxes. The remnant frame of a projecting blade sign mounted to the east



Figure 2: Market Street (north) elevation

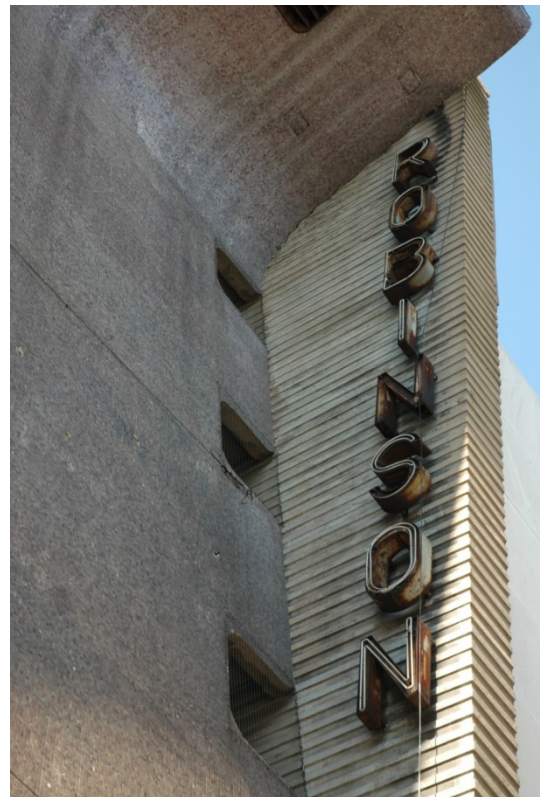


Figure 3: Detail of speedline banding and extant signage.

end wall is also a later alteration. These changes are nevertheless typical for commercial property, are potentially reversible, and have not destroyed the overall character of the original design.

The building's rear Ludlow Street elevation was not significantly altered during the 1946 renovation and retains its c.1883 five-story, nine-bay configuration [Fig. 5]. However, for the purposes of this nomination, it does not substantially contribute to the property's Robinson-era period of significance.



Figure 4: Sign inscription at base of sidewall.



Figure 5: South (Ludlow Street) elevation.

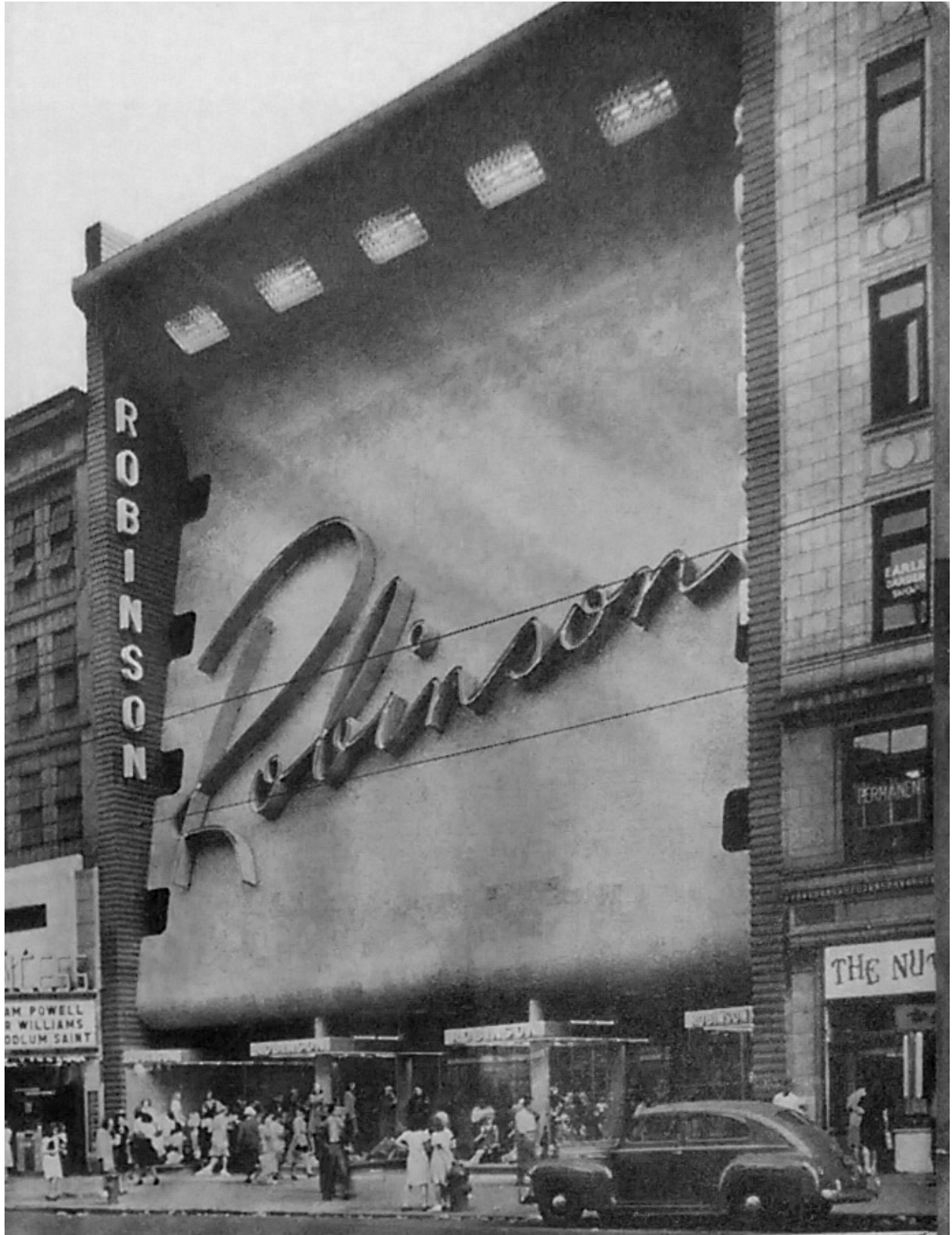


Figure 6: Robinson Store, 1946. (Gottoscho-Schleisner Collection, Library of Congress)



Figure 6 (left): Detail of original arcade, 1946. (Gottoscho-Schleisner Collection, Library of Congress)
 Figure 7 (right): Night view, 1946. (Gottoscho-Schleisner Collection, Library of Congress)

7. Significance

The former Robinson Store at 1020-24 Market Street is a rare surviving example of the early retail work of architect Victor Gruen (1903-1980), now widely considered one of the most influential and significant commercial architects of the twentieth century.¹ Designed in 1946 in collaboration with then-wife and partner Elsie Krummeck (1913-1999), a notable designer in her own right, the Robinson Store was one of at least a dozen unique modern retail shops the couple designed for the California-based Grayson-Robinson chain of budget womenswear retailers in the 1940s. A handful of these stores, including their lone Philadelphia design, were widely published in architectural journals and contributed to Gruen's rising stature as an innovative and influential modern architect. The Robinson Store is the only example of Gruen's work in Philadelphia, and one of the only surviving Grayson-Robinson designs anywhere in the United States. Its ostentatious form epitomized a consumer-oriented approach to design that radically transformed the appearance of commercial corridors in post-World-War-II America, as traditional urban Main Streets began competing fiercely with auto-oriented suburban shopping centers for customers and prestige. While Gruen's legacy today is more closely associated with his later innovations in shopping center design—he is commonly celebrated (and derided) as the “Father of the Shopping Mall”—Gruen and Krummeck's earlier commissions for Grayson-Robinson and other retailers were a formative prelude to his later ambitions.²

In addition, the Robinson Store is locally significant for its association with the history of commerce in Center City Philadelphia. Home to the city's major department stores since the late nineteenth century, East Market Street remained the city's preeminent shopping district—Philadelphia's answer to New York's Fifth Avenue—through much of the twentieth century, claiming an impressive array of national chains and local specialty stores. When the Grayson-Robinson company planned an aggressive national expansion in the 1940s, it chose the 1000

¹ Recent scholarship on Gruen includes M. Jeffrey Hardwick's *Mall Maker: Victor Gruen, Architect of an American Dream* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), Alex Wall's *Victor Gruen: From Urban Shop to New City* (Actar, 2005), and David Smiley's *Pedestrian Modern: Shopping and American Architecture, 1925-1956* (University of Minnesota, 2013).

² Victor Gruen Associates' Southdale Center (1956, Edina, Minnesota) is considered the first modern indoor shopping mall.

block of Market Street as its preferred “100 percent location” to attract Philadelphia shoppers with an unequivocally modern architectural showpiece.³ Arguably the most experimental modern design to be constructed in Philadelphia since the completion of George Howe and William Lescaze’s PSFS Building in 1932, the Robinson Store was one of the first in a wave of store modernizations and new construction that significantly recast the appearance of Philadelphia’s central shopping district in the postwar era. Seventy years after its completion, the Robinson Store remains one of Philadelphia’s most distinctive and significant commercial buildings of its time, representing not only the apex of Market Street as Philadelphia’s traditional retail spine, but also foreshadowing the profound urban/suburban tensions that would radically reshape the corridor in the later twentieth century.

The Robinson Store therefore merits listing on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, satisfying the following criteria established in Philadelphia’s Historic Preservation Ordinance, Section 14-1004 (1):

- (c) Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style;
- (e) Is the work of a designer, architect, landscape architect or designer, or engineer whose work has significantly influenced the historical, architectural, economic, social, or cultural development of the City, Commonwealth or Nation;
and
- (j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

³ The term “100 percent location” was a popular retail theory of identifying the highest and best use of an area for retail.

Modernism and American Retail Architecture, 1925-1955

In broad strokes, the history of retail architecture in twentieth-century America can be traced following outlines that first appeared in avant-garde design circles of turn-of-the-century Europe, particularly the Viennese Secession, De Stijl and Bauhaus movements. Embracing a graphic sensibility that treated building facades as advertising posters more than traditional architectural compositions, modern architecture found its first firm foothold along America's commercial corridors beginning in the late 1920s. Heavily influenced by contemporary European designs like J.J.P. Oud's 1925 Café de Unie in Rotterdam [Fig. 8], a small cohort of primarily European emigrant architects including Rudolf Schindler and J.R. Davidson in Los Angeles and Joseph Urban and Vahan Hagopian in New York



Figure 8: J.J.P. Oud's *Café de Unie*, Rotterdam, 1925.
<http://thecharnelhouse.org/2014/05/27/>

began designing urban stores that broke radically from conventional architectural patterns by emphasizing smooth, continuous wall planes, modern construction materials, and Cubist-inspired compositions.⁴ Rejecting the historicist forms and ornamentation of the myriad revival styles common to architect-designed commercial buildings of the era, these experimental architects were also among the first to wholeheartedly embrace the architectural potential of large-format signage on building facades, long a ubiquitous element of the commercial vernacular landscape but rarely sanctioned by architects themselves, who typically limited commercial identifiers to a few restricted zones (storefront fascias, parapets, etc.) of otherwise traditionally-fenestrated and ornamented facades. Until the arrival of modernism, most

⁴ See Martin Treu, *Signs, Streets and Storefronts*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012, p. 127ff.



Figure 9 (left): 922-924 Market Street, Philadelphia, n.d. Frank H. Taylor Collection, Free Library of Philadelphia
 Figure 10 (right): 1204-1206 Market Street, Philadelphia, n.d. Frank H. Taylor Collection, Free Library of Philadelphia. Commercial signage often competed with or obscured buildings' architectural features.

commercial signage was a later accretion which competed visually with, or completely obscured, a building's architect-designed features [Figs. 9, 10].⁵ In contrast, the signage of early modern shopfronts was an essential component of an overall design. "European shop designers had blurred the line between what was the 'sign' and what was the 'architecture,'" writes architectural historian Martin Treu. "Instead of merely adding the identification as an afterthought, the entire surface of the commercial establishment was one complete composition; no longer was lettering confined to its traditional location on the fascia board just above the shop windows."⁶

In emulating the *au courant* shopfront styles of Paris, Vienna, Berlin, and other capitals of European culture and fashion, early proponents of commercial modernism in America had adopted a new architectural vocabulary—one that replaced the traditional expressions of *gravity* (columns, beams, arches, keystones, etc.) with a decidedly more *graphic* juxtaposition

⁵ Ibid., p. 35ff.

⁶ Ibid., p. 122.

of free-floating surfaces and words. Just as significantly, they had also begun to cultivate a new client base traditionally ignored by professional architects— the store owner and the chain store. “The [American] architecture magazines of the early twentieth century were genteel portfolios of design work in which treatment of stores typically entailed the legitimations of history and convention and a discreet distance from the less seemly associations with commerce or fashion,” writes architectural historian David Smiley.⁷ Or as historian Gabrielle Esperdy asserts,

Bound up as it was with the practices of selling and shopping, of advertising and marketing, of profit margins and retail trends, the commercial realm occupied a lowly position in the unwritten cultural hierarchy that dominated the architectural profession, and the spaces of commerce ranked well below those of government, art, education, and big business in terms of status and prestige.⁸

In contrast, these early modernists proposed that architects, instead of existing solely as purveyors of *propriety*, could instead be active partners in a retailer’s quest for *profit*.

In hindsight, this proposition seems self-evident and this gravitation inevitable, but the subsequent proliferation of modernism in American commercial architecture was fundamentally affected by three later events, each of which helped amplify, in a uniquely American fashion, these early modernist impulses. First was the Great Depression, which, along with corresponding New Deal recovery efforts, radically upended established practices in architecture, real estate, the construction industries, and consumer spending. Second was the onset of World War II, which prolonged the Depression’s state of arrested real estate development while simultaneously fostering a forward-thinking planning culture both within and beyond the field of architecture.⁹ Not coincidentally, the war in Europe also drove a wave of émigré architects into America’s professional ranks, many of whom would take a leading role in the development and promotion of modernist principles in America. Finally, the eventual

⁷ Smiley, David. *Pedestrian Modern: Shopping and American Architecture, 1925-1956*, p. 19.

⁸ Esperdy, Gabrielle. “The Odd-Job Alleyway of Building: Modernization, Marketing, and Architectural Practice in the 1930s,” *Journal of Architectural Education*, Vol. 58, n. 4 (May 2005), p. 28.

⁹ See especially Andrew Shanken, *194X: Architecture, Planning and Consumer Culture on the American Home Front*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

Allied victory in 1945 heralded an era of unfettered economic expansion, aggressive suburbanization, and the full flowering of a consumer culture that became, especially in the context of the Cold War, a major pillar of America's postwar self-identity. Each of these three major events had a direct and formative impact on how modernism, particularly within the commercial landscape, developed and spread.

It is virtually impossible to understate the disruption caused by the stock market crash of 1928 and its subsequent fallout: by 1933, new construction activity had come to a virtual standstill, millions of construction workers, architects, and building supply manufacturers were unemployed, consumer spending plummeted, and retail vacancy rates skyrocketed nationwide.¹⁰ In 1934, newly-elected President Franklin D. Roosevelt unveiled a series of federal programs and policies—collectively branded the New Deal— to stimulate the economy. One of these was the Modernization Credit Plan, also known as the “Modernize Main Street” program, which passed in June 1934 as part of Roosevelt's National Housing Act. Operated by the newly-formed Federal Housing Administration, the program underwrote small low-interest loans for business owners to invest in commercial property improvements.¹¹ While the focus of the program was narrow, its ambitions were broad: to boost production at idled manufacturing plants, to create new work for architects and tradespeople, to promote consumer spending at newly-remodeled businesses, and ultimately to generate physical symbols of prosperity— modern new stores— along America's commercial corridors.

Though nothing in the legislation dictated any particular architectural style or product specifications, the Modernize Main Street program aggressively promoted a streamlined, machine-age aesthetic rooted in European precedents, but adapted for American mass production. Manufacturers like General Electric, Republic Steel, Libbey-Owens-Ford, Pittsburgh Plate Glass, and the Kawneer Company quickly retooled their product lines for the emerging storefront modernization market, while architects were urged to promote their services directly to prospective Main Street clients. Architectural journals began to fill with editorials and

¹⁰ Esperdy, “Odd-Job Alleyway,” p. 26-27; Esperdy, *Modernizing Main Street*, p. 44ff.

¹¹ Esperdy, “Odd-Job Alleyway,” p. 25-26.



Figures 11, 12: Modernize Main Street competition entries, 1935. 52 Designs to Modernize Main Street With Glass, Libbey-Owens-Ford, 1935.

features elevating the “store problem” into the ranks of “serious” architecture, alongside advertisements for new building materials like porcelain enamel and structural glass, extruded metal storefront systems, glass blocks, neon, etc. The impact was immediate: in June 1935 (the same month as the passage of the National Housing Act), Libbey-Owens-Ford sponsored the Modernize Main Street architectural competition, endorsed by the Federal Housing Administration to promote national recovery efforts. More than three thousand architects, one out of every three registered architects in America, submitted redesigns for typical Main Street drug stores, clothing stores, grocery stores, and gas stations— buildings so “quotidian that architects might have ignored them were it not for the extenuating circumstances of the Depression.”¹²

Winning entries, selected by a jury that included famed modernist William Lescaze, were widely publicized in architectural and trade journals, advertisements, and ultimately in *52 Designs to Modernize Main Street with Glass*, a widely-distributed full-color competition catalogue [Figs. 11-12]. As Esperdy notes, virtually all of the winning entries featured “flattened planes and poster-like facades, often highly colored, asymmetrical compositions with strongly defined horizontals and verticals, curved bulkheads, and signage expressed in bold graphics with contemporary typefaces.”¹³ In addition to promoting Libbey-Owens-Ford’s Vitrolite brand of structural glass cladding, *52 Designs* (along with numerous follow-up campaigns by other manufacturers) effectively doubled as a pattern book for modernization in general, disseminating a streamlined modern aesthetic across the country to both architects and their clients alike. By the time that the Modernize Main Street program officially ended in 1943, an estimated \$4 to \$6 billion had been invested in commercial improvements nationwide, and a “Main Street Modern” architectural vernacular was as recognizable as it was widespread.¹⁴ Even more significantly, retail architecture had captured the full attention of American architects, manufacturers, store owners, and, ultimately, consumers.

¹² Esperdy, *Modernizing Main Street*, p. 120.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

The onset of World War II lifted the American economy out of the Great Depression, but effectively suspended manufacturing and construction activities not directly tied to the war effort. Rather than lose this newfound attention, retail architecture and the “store problem” continued to maintain a high profile in architectural discourse of the war years, even as this attention was largely relegated to the “paper architecture” of anticipatory plans. “194X” was a term coined to describe the unknown but presumably imminent transition to a peacetime economy freed from both the debilitations of the Depression and the demands of the war effort. “Almost from the moment the war ended the Depression, Americans began to forecast the world after the war,” writes historian Andrew Shanken. “Buildings and cities provided vivid material for speculation, and architects posed as expert prognosticators.”¹⁵

The 194X era proved fertile for the growth of modernism in commercial architecture, despite (or perhaps actually fed by) the dearth of real clients and projects during the war. During the Depression, most projects were necessarily modest in scope, typically limited to the ground-floor recladding of existing storefronts along established commercial arteries. By the 1940s more architects were experimenting, if initially just on paper, with broader design questions of composition and massing, not only of individual stores, but of commercial building types and development patterns in general. Architects increasingly adopted the language of behavioral psychology in their claims that modern design could draw potential customers off the sidewalk and into stores. The two-dimensional “poster front” of the Depression era evolved into more sculptural designs that consciously interrupted traditional streetwall continuity with recessed arcades, projecting canopies and display boxes, and curvilinear and canted forms. The “open” or “visual” front was predominant, eliminating solid front walls in favor of expansive windows that displayed entire store interiors from the street.

¹⁵ Shanken, p. 1.

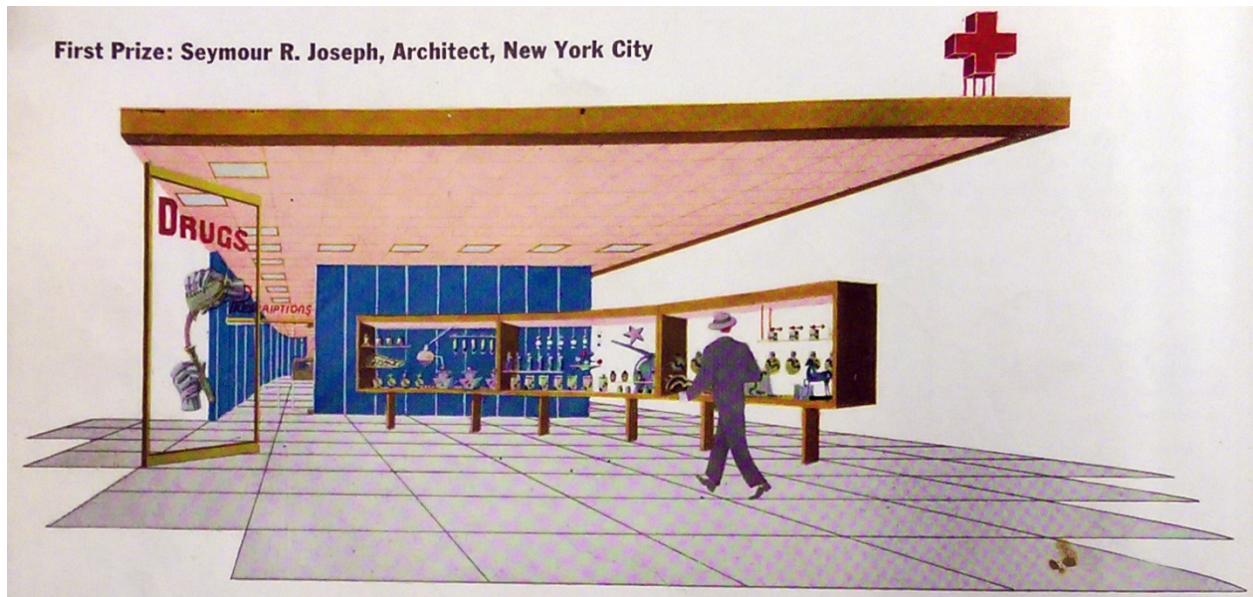


Figure 13: Winning entry in Kawneer's 1942 "Storefront of Tomorrow" competition. *Pencil Points*, Feb. 1943

Building product manufacturers remained key benefactors and promoters of commercial modernism during the wartime construction freeze, sponsoring major design competitions and advertising campaigns that placed the "store of tomorrow" front and center in the popular imagination.¹⁶ One such company was the aluminum manufacturer Kawneer, which aggressively promoted its storefront and cladding products even while its assembly lines were retrofitted for the war. "Typical of much advertising during the war, Kawneer's advertising reflected how vital it was to keep a company name in circulation, since many industries had retooled for arms manufacturing or were severely hobbled by materials limits," writes Smiley. "Companies were looking to the future; a typical Kawneer advertisement included the copy, 'War work today.... Store fronts, Aluminum Doors and Windows Tomorrow.'"¹⁷ In 1942, Kawneer also sponsored the "Store Fronts of Tomorrow" design competition, whose winning entries all featured variations on the open front [Fig. 13].¹⁸ In 1944, Libbey-Owens-Ford published *Visual Fronts*, a follow-up to their 1935 *52 Designs to Modernize Main Street with Glass* that embraced the new open aesthetic, while its fierce competitor Pittsburgh Plate Glass produced *There Is a New Trend in Store Design*, a publication and series of advertisements featuring conceptual open-front store designs by such prominent modern architects as Walter

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 96ff.

¹⁷ Smiley, p. 77.

¹⁸ "Store Fronts of Tomorrow," *The New Pencil Points*, February 1943, pp. 30-35.

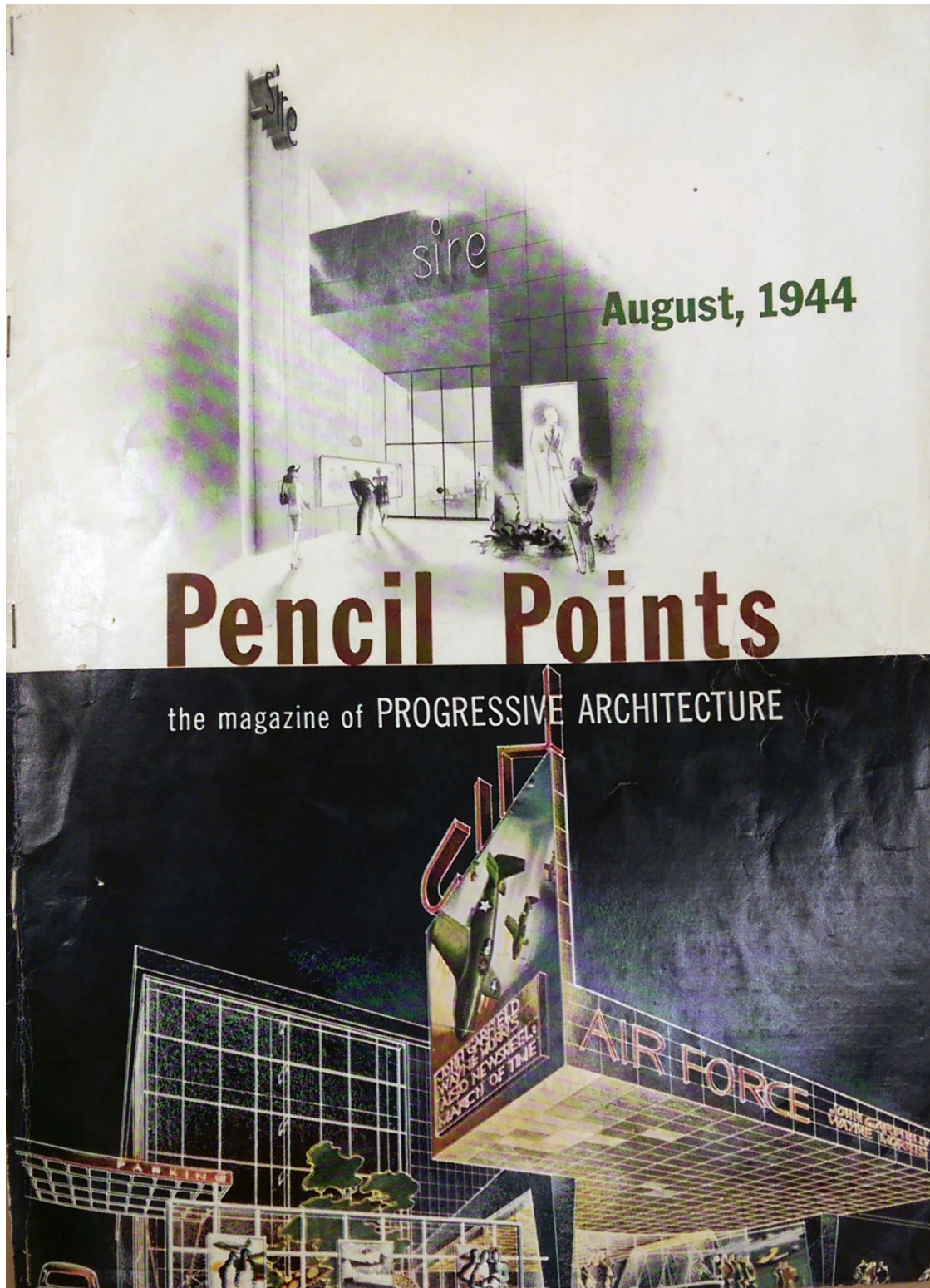


Figure 14: Two concept designs commissioned for Pittsburgh Plate Glass's "There is a New Trend in Store Design" series. Top project is by Gruen & Krummeck, bottom project is by William Lescaze.

Gropius, Pietro Belluschi, William Lescaze, Eero Saarinen, Oscar Stonorov and Louis Kahn, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, and Gruen & Krummeck [Fig. 14].¹⁹

Of course, store design was just one facet of a much broader architectural discourse during the war years, one that grappled with larger issues of housing, education, manufacturing, transportation, and urban redevelopment. Both implicitly and explicitly, the automobile loomed large in all of these discussions. On the macro level, planners anticipated new suburban population patterns and consumer practices that widespread automobile ownership could facilitate; on the micro level, new auto-oriented building types like service stations, supermarkets and drive-ins drew increased architectural attention. Traffic congestion and parking shortages, a problem in most urban cores since at least the 1920s, led to much speculation about the fate of traditional downtown Main Streets vis-a-vis the more autocentric suburban shopping centers then on many drafting boards.

True to expectations, the end of World War II did bring profound changes to American culture and the built landscape. Average wages and buying power rose in tandem with a flood of new consumer goods, spreading the ascendent gospel of planned obsolescence. Rapid suburbanization was fueled by federal housing policy, highway construction, and the Cold War mantra of decentralization. After 1954, changes in federal tax law created huge financial incentives for constructing new retail developments (but not for rehabilitating existing structures), tipping the scales of commercial activity even more firmly toward new suburban shopping centers and away from traditional urban downtowns.²⁰ Between 1953 and 1956, for example, the rate of shopping center construction in America *tripled*, with 31 million square feet of shopping center space built in 1956 alone (compared to only 1 million in 1947).²¹

¹⁹ Smiley, pp. 83-85.

²⁰ On "accelerated depreciation," see especially Thomas W. Hanchett, "U.S. Tax Policy and the Shopping-Center Boom of the 1950s and 1960s," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 101, n. 4, October 1996, pp. 1082-1110.

²¹ Hanchett, pp. 1098-1099.

But downtown's postwar decline was neither immediate nor definitive. Spurred by increased sales and the pressure to "keep up" with the competition, be it next door or across town, downtown and Main Street merchants in the late 1940s and 1950s built new stores and storefronts at an unprecedented rate and scale, translating the conceptual "paper architecture" of the war years into physical reality. As Martin Treu notes, "The postwar surge of suburban development forced greater change on downtown and Main Street than anything over a century of almost constant design evolution had yet done."²² Now scaled explicitly for the automobile in addition to the pedestrian, the requisite *modern* store of the 1950s combined new materials, dynamic shapes, large-scale signage and graphics, open displays, and state-of-the-art lighting and climate-control technologies to attract and persuade. "The store front is the silent salesman working on the street 24 hours a day," wrote prolific commercial architect Morris Lapidus in 1954. "It is a newspaper advertising plastered across Main Street. Few indeed are the shops entered through a self-effacing door."²³

Victor Gruen and Elsie Krummeck

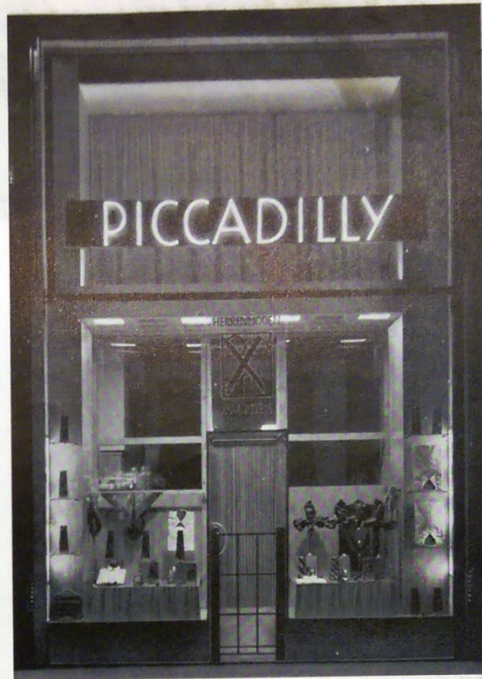
Few if any architects better illustrate the trajectory of modernism through the 20th-century commercial landscape than Victor Gruen, who arrived in America as a refugee following the Nazi annexation of his native Austria in 1938. Born Victor Grünbaum in 1903, he grew up in Vienna's historic Innere Stadt district in a middle-class Jewish family active in the city's vibrant arts and theater circles. Gruen studied architecture at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts under acclaimed modernist Peter Behrens, developing a particular appreciation for the work of Adolf Loos, whose 1908 manifesto "Ornament and Crime" was a modernist touchstone. From 1923 to 1932, Gruen worked as a designer and construction manager for the architectural firm of Melcher & Steiner, whose work included large municipal housing projects. At the same time, he

²² Treu, p. 196.

²³ Morris Lapidus, *Designs for Modern Merchandizing*, quoted in Mike Jackson, "'Storefronts of Tomorrow': American Storefront Design from 1940 to 1970," *Preserving the Recent Past 2*, Deborah Slaton and William G. Foulks, editors. Washington, D.C.: Historic Preservation Education Foundation, 2000, p. 64.



Glasportal einer Parfümerie in Wien, mit weißem Marbruniglas mattiert.
Entwurf: Arch. Viktor Grünbaum, Wien, I.



Hemdenmacherportal. Entwurf: Arch. Viktor Grünbaum



Ganzglasanlage bei einem Herrenmodengeschäft. Arch. Viktor Grünbaum



Portal einer Konfiserie in schwarz-weißem Glas. Entwurf: Arch. Viktor Grünbaum Wien, I.

Figure 15: Four Viennese shop designs by Victor Gruen. Victor Gruen Papers, Library of Congress.

helped found a Socialist theater troupe and grew increasingly active in the city's intertwined political and cabaret scenes. Gruen established his own architectural firm in 1932 but remained focused on writing and performing political skits for Vienna's Social Democratic Party until both the party and the cabaret were banned in 1934.²⁴ Between then and his forced escape from Nazism in 1938, he rose to minor architectural fame for a series of elegant modernist boutiques along Vienna's well-heeled shopping avenues. Published in both European and American journals (including *Display* and *Architectural Review* in Britain, *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* in France, and *Pencil Points* in the United States), these avant-garde designs employed smooth surfaces, modern materials, large display windows, prominent signage, and state-of-the-art lighting— exactly the “European look” then gaining caché in the United States [Fig. 15].²⁵

Penniless upon his arrival in New York City in July 1938, Gruen (who then spoke no English and would keep his Gruenbaum surname until becoming an American citizen in 1944) initially found work as a draftsman and model-maker for Norman Bel Geddes' seminal Futurama exhibit for General Motors at the New York World's Fair.²⁶ His first American commission was for fellow Viennese émigré Ludwig Lederer, a leather goods merchant who was familiar with Gruen's Vienna shopfronts. Lederer hired Gruen to design a new high-end Lederer de Paris boutique on 5th Avenue, directly next door to Ciro of Bond Street, a jewelry store then being planned by Morris Ketchum, another emerging retail modernist [Fig. 16]. Ketchum agreed to stamp the Lederer drawings for Gruen, who lacked an American architectural license, and the two young designers began a brief but productive partnership. The pair designed two more well-received stores— Paris Decorators in the Bronx and the Steckler Dress Hats on Broadway— before parting ways in 1939.²⁷

²⁴ Hardwick, M. Jeffrey. *Mall Maker: Victor Gruen, Architect of an American Dream*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, pp. 8-13; Wall, Alex. *Victor Gruen: From Urban Shop to New City*, Barcelona: Actar, 2005, pp. 4-5.

²⁵ Victor Gruen Papers, 1886-1981, Box OV11, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

²⁶ Hardwick, pp. 16-18; Wall, p. 6.

²⁷ Wall, p. 30. Their partnership received accolades in *Architectural Forum* (Dec. 1939), *The Store of Greater New York* (July 1939 and Aug. 1939), *Women's Wear Daily* (June 16, 1939), *Pencil Points* (Aug. 1939), *Men's Wear* (Nov. 1939), and *Retailing* (May 6, 1940). Victor Gruen Papers, Box OV11.



Figure 16: Morris Ketchum's *Ciro* of Bond Street (left) and Victor Gruen's *Lederer de Paris*, New York, 1938. The Store of Greater New York, August 1939.



Figure 17: Victor Gruen and Elsie Krummeck, circa 1940. Victor Gruen Papers, Box OV11, Library of Congress.

In November 1939, Gruen formed a partnership with Elsie Krummeck (1913-1999), a Brooklyn-born sculptor, industrial designer and graduate of the Parsons School of Design.²⁸ The two met while working on the New York World's Fair, where Krummeck designed more than 25 exhibits (she had also designed exhibits for the 1933 Century of Progress Exhibition in Chicago).²⁹ They married in 1941, and their firm (known originally as Gruenbaum & Krummeck, briefly as Gruenbaum, Krummeck & Auer, and after 1944 as Gruen & Krummeck) quickly earned a national reputation for store design. Their first commission, again for Viennese transplants, was the open-fronted Altman & Kuhne confectionery, located across the street from Lederers de Paris on 5th Avenue. Its grand opening in December 1939 made the front page of the *New York Times*, and the store was featured in the Architectural League of New York's 1940 annual exhibition as a "distinguished example of modern architecture."³⁰ Numerous New York commissions soon followed, including Barton's Bonbonnière (for yet another Viennese emigrant) and the Strasser Studio for Handicrafts, both of which were featured alongside Gruen's earlier work with Morris Ketchum in the Museum of Modern Art's 1940 *Guide to Modern*

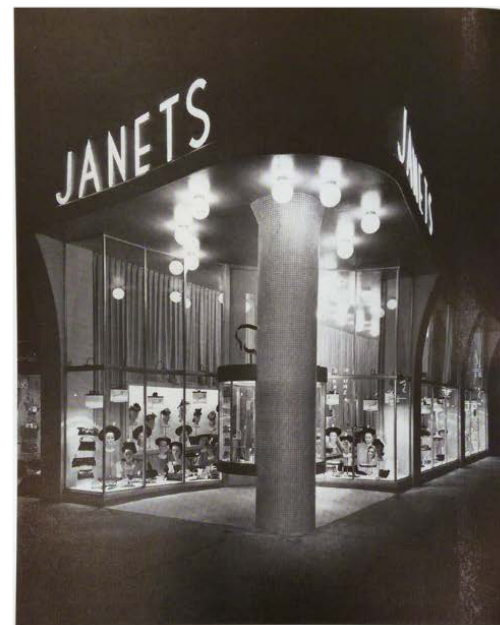
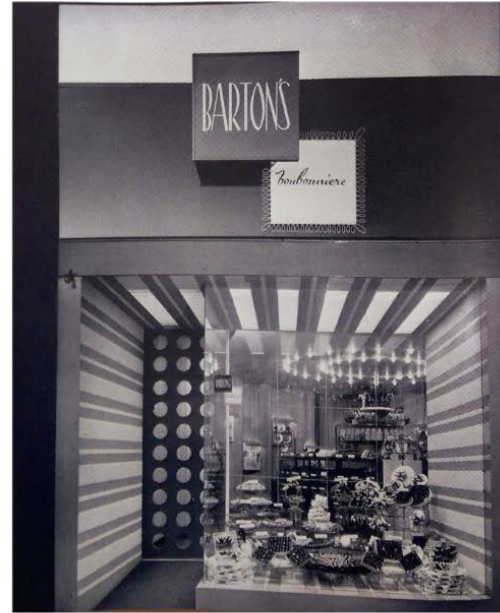


Figure 18 (top): Barton's Bonbonniere, Gruen & Krummeck, New York, 1940

Figure 19 (bottom): Janet's Millinery, Gruen & Krummeck, Oklahoma City, 1940

Victor Gruen Papers, Box OV11, Library of Congress

²⁸ Oliver, Myrna, "Elsie Krummeck Crawford; Artistic Industrial Designer," *Los Angeles Times*, June 3, 1999. <http://articles.latimes.com/1999/jun/03/news/mn-43692>, accessed 2/8/2016.

²⁹ "Recent Work by Gruenbaum, Krummeck & Auer," *Architectural Forum*, September 1941, p. 191.

³⁰ "Hotel, Store and Apartment Properties Figuring in Manhattan Real Estate Activity," *New York Times*, Dec. 3, 1939; Victor Gruen Papers, Box OV11

Architecture: Northeast States.³¹ They also began attracting clients from further afield, notably Canturbury Haberdashers in upstate New York, Janet's Millinery Store in Oklahoma City, and a J. Magnin womenswear boutique in Reno, Nevada. Cyril Magnin, president of the Joseph Magnin Company, persuaded the couple to relocate to California in early 1941— a move that would prove to be highly prescient and would mark the beginning of a paradigm shift, not only in the couple's own work, but in the broader American retail landscape.³²

Grayson-Robinson Company

Gruen and Krummeck's initial success on the East Coast was more than matched by their reception on the West Coast. But while their New York projects espoused an unmistakable continental character— most of their early clients had European pedigrees, and most of their early designs repeated the compact scale and crisp right angles of Gruen's Viennese *oeuvre*— the couple's California residency quickly bore fruits of a new flavor. Nowhere is this evolution more evident than in their work for the Grayson Company (later the Grayson-Robinson Company), which commissioned Gruen & Krummeck designs for more than a dozen new and remodelled womenswear stores across the country between 1940 and 1947. The Los Angeles-based Grayson's Stores operated across the West Coast, specializing in mass-market ready-to-wear fashion— "Where Smart Women Buy Smart Clothes for Less." The chain's exponential growth during the war years was a direct reflection of women's increased participation in the workforce; angling to attract the disposable income of an estimated four million women entering the workforce for the first time, Grayson's expanded rapidly and in lock-step with where the United States War Production Board was concentrating wartime manufacturing.³³ Even after 1942, when the War Production Board imposed bans on non-essential construction activity, Grayson's (with Gruen and Krummeck at the drafting table) opened new and enlarged

³¹ McAndrew, John. *Guide to Modern Architecture: Northeast States*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1940.

³² Hardwick, pp. 48, 238; Wall, pp. 41.

³³ Hardwick, pp. 50-52; Wall, p. 38.

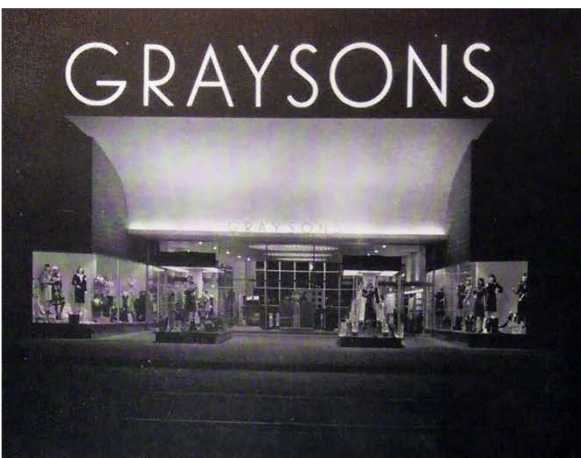


Figure 20 (top): Grayson Seattle, Gruen & Krummeck, 1940. *Architectural Forum*, September 1941.

Figure 21 (bottom left): Grayson Los Angeles, Gruen & Krummeck, 1940. *Display World*, December 1941.

Figure 22 (bottom right): Grayson Santa Monica, Gruen & Krummeck, 1940. *Women's Wear Daily*, Feb. 24, 1941.

“Victory” stores using temporary and substitute materials like fabric, fiberboard and wood.³⁴ Flush with wartime profits, the company completed their acquisition of the East Coast’s Robinson chain in 1945 and resumed an aggressive expansion that ran through the end of the decade.

In contrast to the refined boutiques typical of Gruen & Krummeck’s New York clients, Grayson’s (and later Robinson’s) stores were larger, more flamboyant outposts aimed at higher traffic and mass appeal. They also marked a pronounced shift away from a self-consciously European look to a more Americanized— perhaps even “Californized” — aesthetic orientation. “California is a not just a State; California is a way of life,” as Gruen explained the “California look” in 1945. “California is a new country, a modern country, a country open to contemporary ideas.”³⁵ The firm’s first Grayson design debuted in 1940 in Seattle, establishing a template that would be echoed (with liberal variation and experimentation) in all their subsequent Grayson-Robinson commissions [Fig. 20]. The dynamic, visually daring store combined three adjacent 30-foot retail fronts and the full height of an existing three-story facade, which was entirely rebuilt for the project. A 30-foot-deep, full-width arcade was cut into the building, sheltered by a three-story, outward-curving steel-framed stucco canopy that supported a massive neon-lit “GRAYSON” sign at the roofline. Glass and steel display cases formed freestanding display islands and lined the side walls of the arcade, whose rear wall was an open-fronted expanse of glass providing clear views into the store interior.³⁶ Boldly merging what contemporary Morris Lapidus would identify as the three crucial duties of the modern storefront— effective merchandise display, eye-catching architectural identity, and easy access to the store’s interior— the Seattle Grayson prototype innovated at an unprecedented scale.³⁷ Two additional variations on this curved canopy design quickly followed in Santa Monica [Fig. 22] and Los Angeles [Fig. 21], the latter of

³⁴ “New Stores Opened By Ingenious Use of Substitute Materials,” *Chain Store Age*, January 1944, p. 24.

³⁵ Gruen, Victor, “The California Look in Store Design,” *California Men’s Stylist*, April 1945, p. 81.

³⁶ “Recent Work by Gruenbaum, Krummeck & Auer,” *Architectural Forum*, September 1941, pp. 196-7.

³⁷ Lapidus, Morris, “Store Design: A Merchandising Problem,” *Architectural Record*, February 1941, pp. 118-119.

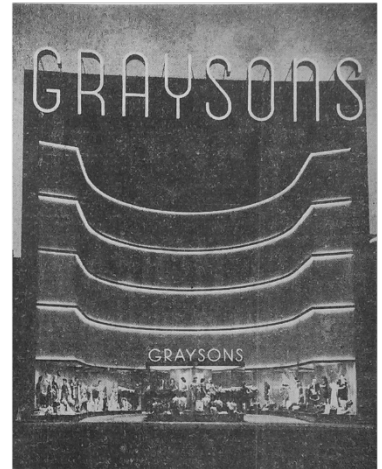


Figure 23 (left): Grayson San Diego, Gruen & Krummeck, 1942. Chain Store Age, June 1946

Figure 24 (top right): Grayson Inglewood CA, Gruen & Krummeck, 1942. Inglewood Daily News, Aug. 20, 1942

Figure 25 (bottom right): Robinson Buffalo, Gruen & Krummeck, 1941. Annual Report 1947, Grayson-Robinson Stores, Inc.

which (located along a new retail strip on Crenshaw Boulevard) was also noteworthy (and prescient) for orienting an attractive second entrance to face a rear parking lot.³⁸

Gruen & Krummeck completed at least two additional Grayson stores (in Inglewood and San Diego) and one Robinson store (in Buffalo, NY) before 1942 wartime restrictions redirected their efforts to temporary construction [Figs. 23-25]. All three were variations on another scheme, described in the trade press as “a horseshoe front of structural glass and chrome in Hollywood style.”³⁹ Each was designed around a three-story wall of glass that curved inward from the street, forming a semicircular arcade that wrapped around ground-floor display islands. Streamlined bands of structural glass flanked a central three-story display window, crowned by an enormous sign band that spanned the arcade and extended above the roofline. In each city, the company took out full-page (sometimes double-page) newspaper advertisements to announce their grand openings, complete with large architectural renderings and hyperbolic praise for the stores’ modern architecture: “Tomorrow something new enters the life of Buffalo...something that brings with it a sense of civic achievement. It’s a new store...but more than just a store! It’s the symbol of pride and belief in our city...for tomorrow Buffalo will possess ‘America’s Newest and Most Beautiful Store’!”⁴⁰

Philadelphia’s Robinson Store (which will be explored in more detail in the following section) was part of an immediate postwar building campaign that included new Grayson branches in Pasadena, Hollywood, and El Paso, Texas, redesign of the temporary San Francisco “Victory” store, and a new Robinson’s branch in Salt Lake City, all designed by Gruen & Krummeck. Whereas most of the couple’s prewar Grayson-Robinson designs derived from one of two basic schemes (albeit with significant customization), these new stores were each totally unique. In Pasadena, for example, the architects left a deeply-recessed two-story arcade open to the sky and framed it with playful rippling sidewalls. In Hollywood, a one-story arcade featured a neon-

³⁸ “Novel Design Proves To Have Customer Pulling Power,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, Feb. 24, 1941, p. 26; Nicholson, Emrich. *Contemporary Shops in the United States*. New York: Architectural Book Publishing Company, 1945, p. 48.

³⁹ “Robinson’s to Open Unit in Buffalo,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, July 16, 1941, p. 1.

⁴⁰ *Buffalo Evening News*, Sept. 5, 1941, p. 24.

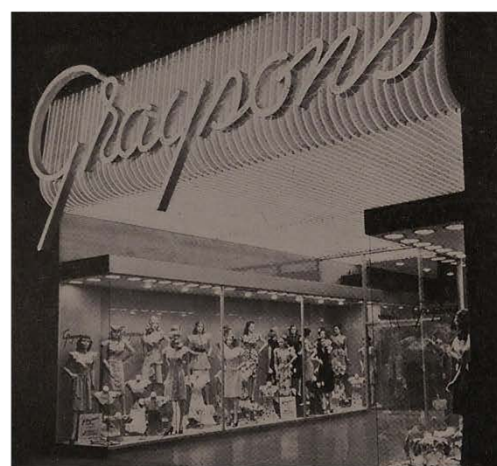
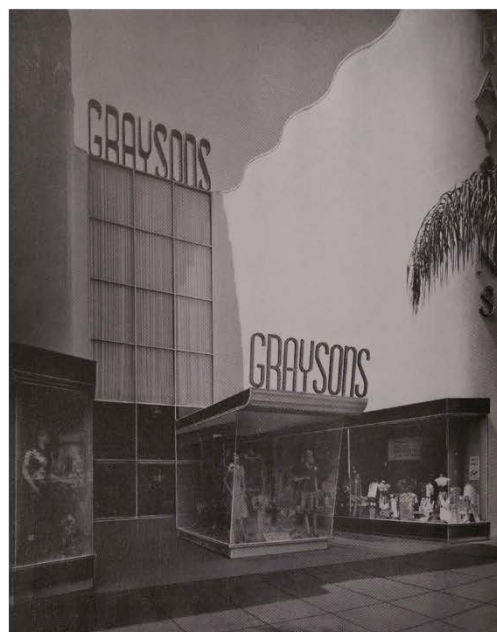
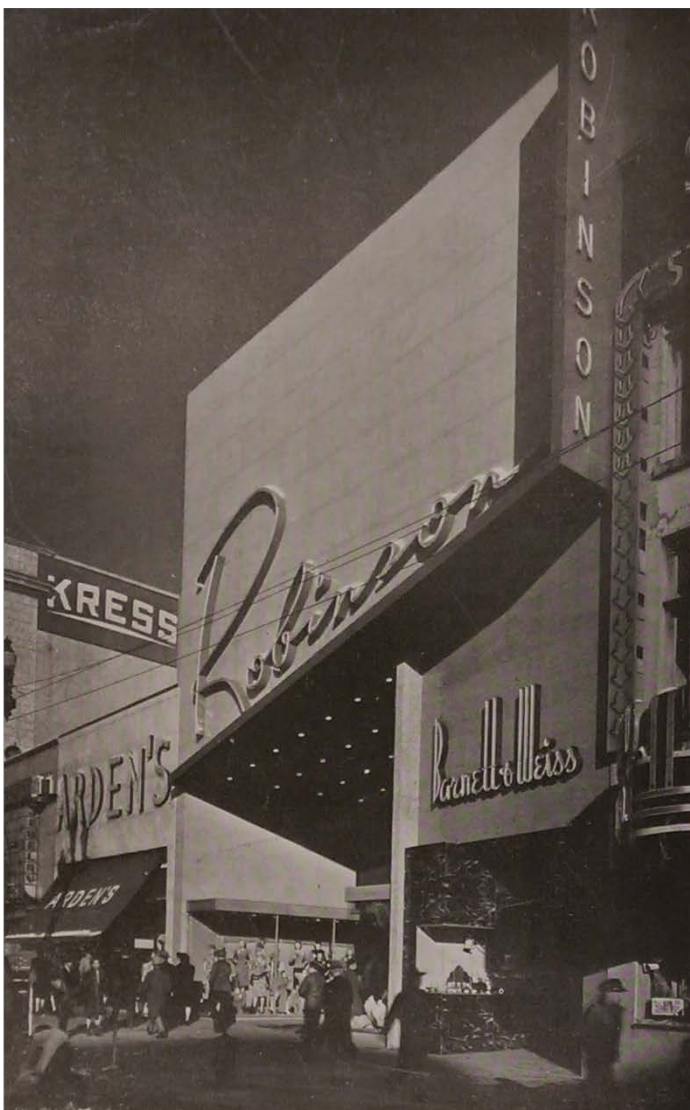


Figure 26 (left): Robinson Salt Lake City, Gruen & Krummeck, 1946. *Jeweler's Circular-Keystone*, April 1947

Figure 27 (top right): Grayson Pasadena, Gruen & Krummeck, 1945. *Annual Report 1946, Grayson-Robinson Stores, Inc.*

Figure 28 (bottom right): Grayson Hollywood, Gruen & Krummeck, 1946. *Chain Store Age*, August 1946

lined ceiling which swept outward and upward into a flashy theater-like marquee. In Salt Lake City, an existing three-story commercial building was reconfigured as an enormous backdrop to a neon-lit Robinson script sign that stretched across the face of the building. Beneath the sign, the angled ceiling of a two-story arcade was studded with a grid of recessed soffit lights that continued into the store's interior through a full-height glass curtain wall [Figs. 26-28]. Though unique, all of these designs bear a distinct family resemblance to each other and to the Philadelphia store, each striving to be, in the words of one contemporary account, "the most striking building on the block." Each employed a monumental scale, novel architectural forms, modern materials, dramatic lighting schemes, and architecturally-integrated signage at multiple scales and in a variety of typefaces to attract attention. At the same time, each largely adhered to traditional patterns of urban commerce: all were sited along established or new commercial corridors, all were built to the sidewalk and scaled explicitly for pedestrian traffic, and none were freestanding units. All took for granted, and indeed championed, the practice of window shopping as a *sine qua non* of the urban condition, part of a "theater of the street... as intrinsic to urban culture as sitting on a stoop or chatting on a corner."⁴¹

Gruen & Krummeck's Grayson-Robinson designs were widely published in architectural journals (*Architectural Forum*, *Architect and Engineer*, *Progressive Architecture*), retail trade publications (*Chain Store Age*, *Display World*), and an emerging genre of commercial design stylebooks and surveys through the late 1940s and early 1950s. Emrich Nicholson's 1945 *Contemporary Shops in the United States* featured four Grayson branches alongside Gruen & Krummeck's earlier New York commissions; in a letter to Gruen on the occasion of the book's publication, Nicholson wrote, "Your stores, or rather those that your firm designed, are among the finest and most original in the United States. I should know— for I've spent almost two years seeking the better designed stores in this country. We are publishing more of your work than any other one firm."⁴² To place this praise in a broader context, *Architectural Forum* editor George Nelson wrote in the forward to Nicholson's book, "In the past decade we have turned out good schools, good homes and good hospitals. Modern architecture has become an accepted fact to

⁴¹ Wall, p. 23.

⁴² Emrich Nicholson to Victor Gruen, Jan. 14, 1945, Victor Gruen Papers, Box #OV12.

a rapidly expanding section of the public. But in no section of the building field has there been the amount of fruitful experimentation, the depth of understanding of the problem, or the variety of expression that has gone into shops.”⁴³

Tellingly, Gruen & Krummeck parted ways with the Grayson-Robinson Company in early 1948, following a dispute over the design of a new suburban branch store in Los Angeles. In a letter to the editor published in *Architectural Forum*, Gruen protested the company’s rejection of plans “designed primarily to catch the attention of the automobile public” in favor of a standard arcade front that, according to Gruen, “would never have an appreciable amount of foot traffic.” “The changes which Grayson’s demanded on these plans were such that we felt we would render a disservice to them, if we would give in.”⁴⁴ As a group, the Grayson-Robinson stores of the 1940s represent something of a high water mark, designed at the height of modernism’s professional and popular appeal. Yet they also exemplify a commercial type that, within a decade or two, would face near-extinction with the rise of suburban shopping centers and shopping malls— a rise largely championed and given architectural form by Gruen himself.

1020-24 Market Street: The Robinson Store in Context

In 1946 the Robinson-Grayson company acquired 1020-24 Market Street, a five-story commercial building in the heart of Philadelphia’s central shopping district. The site occupied nearly the exact midpoint of a vibrant retail artery anchored by Lit Brothers at 7th Street and Wanamaker’s at 13th Street, with Gimbel Brothers, Strawbridge & Clothier, Snellenberg’s, and Frank & Seder rounding out Philadelphia’s “Big Six” department store institutions along this stretch of Market Street.⁴⁵ The corridor was also home to dozens of national and local retailers: between 9th and 11th Street alone, there were five competing “five-and-dime” variety store chains (F.W. Woolworth’s, H.L. Green’s, W.T. Grant’s, S.S. Kresge’s, and S. McRory’s), five shoes

⁴³ Nicholson, p. 8.

⁴⁴ Gruen, Victor, “Architect Bites Client,” *Architectural Forum*, Feb. 1948.

⁴⁵ Sullivan, David, “Department Stores,” *Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia*.
<http://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/departments-stores/>

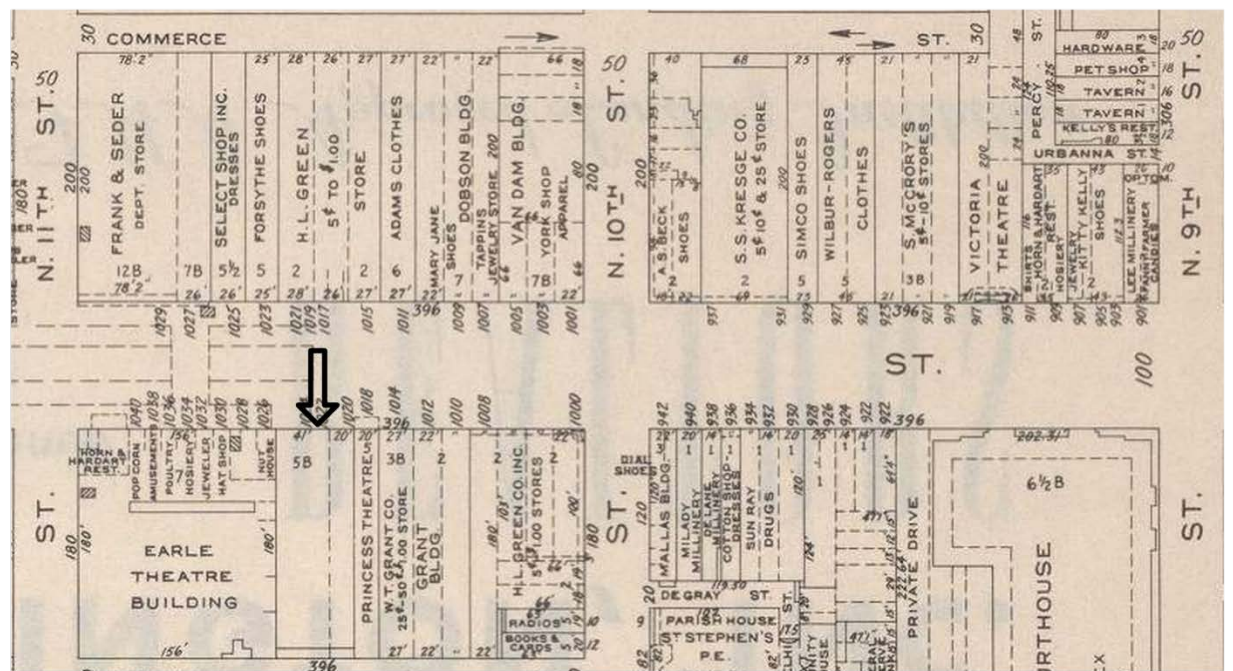
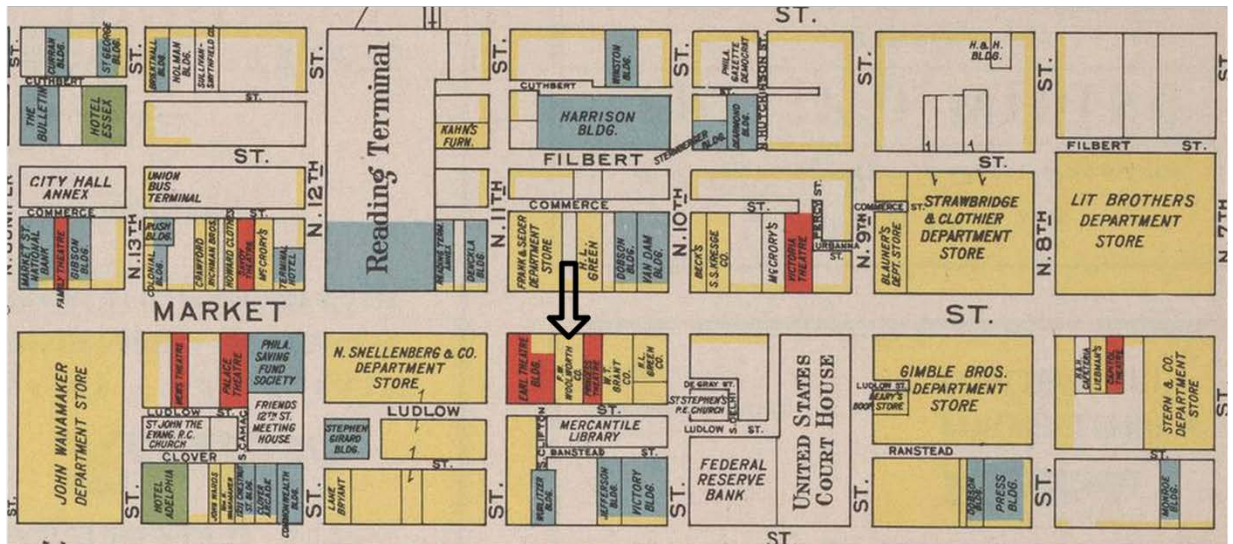


Figure 29 (top): Market Street from Juniper to 7th Street, showing location of major department stores and retailers in 1946. Arrow marks 1020 Market Street. Franklin's Street and Business Occupancy Atlas, p.5.. Free Library of Philadelphia.

Figure 30 (bottom): Market Street detail, 11th Street to 9th Street, showing all businesses in 1946. Arrow marks 1020 Market Street. Franklin's Street and Business Occupancy Atlas, p. 8A.. Free Library of Philadelphia.

stores (including national chains A.S. Beck, Kitty Kelly, and Forsythe), four large apparel stores (including Adams Clothes and the York Shops), and at least a half-dozen boutique millineries, dress shops and jewelry stores [Figs. 29-30].⁴⁶ The district was served by five surface trolley lines, the Market Street subway, and the Reading Terminal Station between 11th and 12th Streets; in other words, it was the proverbial “100 percent location” that Grayson-Robinson sought for their rapidly-expanding chain of ready-to-wear dress shops.

From an architectural perspective, these two blocks of Market Street alone provide a rich snapshot of Philadelphia’s commercial landscape at the dawn of the postwar era. While a few businesses occupied relatively recent purpose-built buildings (H.L. Green’s two modest Art Deco blocks at 1000-1008 and 1017-1021 Market Street, for example), most others occupied the lower floors of larger, older nineteenth-century lofts. The majority of these businesses featured updated storefronts— large new neon signs, streamlined ground-floor cladding, new display windows, etc.— typical of Depression-era modernization efforts. In some cases, obsolete upper floors had been removed entirely; more often, they remained unaltered and underutilized [Figs. 31-32]. In this context, 1020-24 Market Street was entirely typical. Built in 1883, the five-story, six-bay masonry loft building was designed by Collins & Autenrieth for prominent real estate developer and civic leader Charles H. Lea, one of at least a dozen similar multi-tenant commercial investment properties the firm produced for Lea in the late nineteenth century.⁴⁷ According to insurance maps and historic photographs, the building originally housed a ground-floor hardware store with light-industrial upper-floor tenants including a locksmith and tool manufacturer, a furniture upholsterer, and decorative metalwork studio [Fig. 34].⁴⁸ By 1916 it was owned by the F.W. Woolworth Company, which operated a ground-floor branch at the location until 1945.⁴⁹ At the time of its sale the following year,

⁴⁶ *Franklin’s Street and Business Occupancy Atlas of Philadelphia and Suburbs, 1946*, Occupancy Map 1. Free Library of Philadelphia Map Collection. <http://libwww.freelibrary.org/maps/detail.cfm?itemID=MFSCAA00008a>

⁴⁷ “Lea Building,” Collins & Autenrieth Architectural Works, University of Delaware Library Special Collections; Leech, Benjamin, “720-722 Chestnut Street,” Philadelphia Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, 9/17/2014.

⁴⁸ *Insurance Maps of the City of Philadelphia, 1887*. Philadelphia: Ernest Hexamer & Son, 1887, Volume 2, Plate 16.

⁴⁹ Application for Zoning Permit #87843, March 1, 1946.



Figure 31 (top): 1000 block of Market Street, north side (opposite Robinson Store), 1949. J. Solin-Cohen, Print and Picture Collection, Free Library of Philadelphia

Figure 32 (bottom): Modernized storefronts at 936-940 Market Street, 1949. Lionel Friedman, Print and Picture Collection, Free Library of Philadelphia.

Woolworth's was only using the upper floors for storage, and the 63-year-old building was considered "an ancient dime store."⁵⁰ [Fig. 33]

Gruen & Krummeck's design for the new store, Robinson's first and only Philadelphia branch, entailed the complete demolition and reconstruction of the building's front. While this was standard practice for the Grayson-Robinson Company, the sheer scope of this modernization effort by an individual retailer in 1946 Philadelphia was rare. Even more rare was the design itself: a colorful, sculptural, sweeping facade that doubled as a 70-foot-tall billboard projecting out and over a deep arcade. While no two Gruen & Krummeck designs for Grayson-Robinson were completely identical, the Philadelphia store represented both a continuation and a departure for the firm. It combined the structural dynamism and curved lines of their prewar schemes with the more planar qualities of their Salt Lake City billboard-style front; it also duplicated the arcade plan of their Seattle prototype almost exactly, and continued the architects' experimentation with bold and inventive lighting schemes. More subtly, the grooved concrete stucco speedlines which framed the Santa Monica Grayson's show windows reappeared in Philadelphia as textured side walls.

Other features were entirely new for the chain and for the architects. For example, the Philadelphia store was their first to feature glass mosaic cladding; 818,900 individual one-inch glass tesserae manufactured by the renowned Judson Studios of Los Angeles covered the entire facade, from the ceiling of the arcade



Figure 33 (top): 1020 Market, c. 1945. Women's Reporter, Dec. 1947

Figure 34 (bottom): 1020 Market on right, c. 1890. Frank H. Taylor Collection, Free Library of Philadelphia

⁵⁰ "Dress Shop," *Architectural Forum*, July 1947, p. 111.

to the lip of the fifth-floor cornice.⁵¹ A 1946 letter from Horace T. Judson to Gruen & Krummeck credits the architects for their innovative use of the material, which by the 1950s became a common storefront cladding:

We wish to thank you for the opportunity which your ingenuity and design gave us of working with you in establishing new material and patterns for the fronts on the Grayson and Robinson stores. While we have worked with mosaics over a number of years, nothing of such great quantity and unique planning has been attempted to our knowledge. Also it will be pleasing to you to learn that we received highly flattering comments from Philadelphia.⁵²

Construction began in the spring of 1946 and was completed by August. The new store occupied the entire width and depth of the first floor and basement; upper floors were used for offices and storage. The design received national attention in both architectural and trade journals, with positive coverage from *Business Week* (Sept. 14, 1946), *Illuminating Engineering* (January 1947), *California Arts & Architecture* (February 1947), *Architectural Forum* (July 1947), *Southwest Builder and Contractor* (Nov. 28, 1947), *Women's Reporter* (December 1947), and *Designs* (March 1948). It was also published in Louis Parnes' *Planning Stores that Pay* (New York: Architectural Record Book, 1948) and Jose Fernandez's *Specialty Shops: A Guide* (New York, Architectural Book Publishing, 1950). The store also drew significant local interest and comment, including this charming if biased praise from the project's construction supervisor, in a letter to Grayson-Robinson and the architects:

Many times has it been said that Philadelphians are the staid, slow plodding type of humanity that find it difficult to appreciate new ideas. If never before, this statement has been proven a fallacy, for I [...] can quote remarks and comments passed by fellow townsmen as they passed by your building.... I quote: "What a building—Isn't that a marvelous front—what are the other stores going to do now." These and many others. Having virtually lived with the construction from its day of birth to this the eve before its christening, permit me to add my personal comments. New Ideas, Splendid vision and a building that is second to none in this our city.⁵³

⁵¹ Untitled article, *California Arts & Architecture*, Feb. 1947, Victor Gruen Papers, Box OV14.

⁵² Horace T. Judson to Gruen and Krummeck, Sept. 12, 1946, Victor Gruen Papers, Box OV13.

⁵³ Charles A. Barsuglia to Robinson, Inc., Aug. 13, 1946, Victor Gruen Papers, Box OV13.

"What are the other stores going to do now?" was a common refrain in the competitive consumer culture that played such a central role in the dissemination of modernism, especially as it applied to retail architecture. In Philadelphia and elsewhere, Grayson-Robinson's ambitious modernization efforts, if not directly responsible for subsequent renovations by their neighbors and competitors, were clearly on the cutting edge of design trends that proliferated across commercial districts through the 1950s, albeit with varying degrees of sophistication. Even some of Gruen & Krummeck's own later commissions were for businesses located next door to Grayson and Robinson stores, for example their Galen Kamp's shoe store in Los Angeles and their Barnett & Weiss jewelry store Salt Lake City.⁵⁴ In Philadelphia, the property immediately east of Robinson's was converted from the Princess Theater to a Tri-Plex Shoes in the 1951; though not a Gruen & Krummeck design, the new store (designed by Kaplan & Fish) clearly duplicated the bullnosed billboard front and arcade arrangement of its neighbor [Fig. 35].⁵⁵ Elsewhere in Center City, other notable architects followed suit with modernist shopfronts of their own, including Thalheimer & Weitz's Baker's Shoes (1318-20 Chestnut Street, 1948) and Oskar Stonorov and Louis Kahn's Coward Shoes (1118 Chestnut Street, 1949, recently demolished). By the 1950's, an incomplete list of noteworthy modern retail architecture across Philadelphia would grow to include Stein Flowers (7059 Frankford Avenue, George Neff, 1950), Sophy Curson Dress Shop (122 S. 19th Street, Beryl Price, 1952), Ott Cameras (6901 Castor Avenue, Allan Berkowitz, 1955), and the National Products Building (109-131 N. 2nd Street, Sabatino & Fishman, 1957), the only building of this group currently listed on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. Expanding this lineage to include banks, another significant client base which embraced similar characteristics of postwar modernism, one also notes the Second Federal Savings & Loan (1727 Chestnut Street, Stanley Selinck, 1948), PSFS's Mayfair Branch (7323 Frankford Avenue, James Hatfield and Lloyd Malkus, c. 1950), Quaker Savings & Loan (33-37 S. 16th Street, Sydney Jelinek, 1954), and Cayuga Federal Savings & Loan (121 S. 13th Street, Philip Mastrin, 1960), among others.

⁵⁴ "Galen Kamp's Shoe Store, Los Angeles, California," *Progressive Architecture*, July 1946, p. 48; "Dual Remodeling Has Advantages for Both," *Jeweler's Keystone and Circular*, April 1947.

⁵⁵ Application for Zoning Permit #42750B, 1018 Market Street, Sept. 21, 1951.



Figure 35: Robinson Store in 1961, following Peerless Camera storefront alteration. Philadelphia City Archives.

In 1958, the Grayson-Robinson Company acquired the New York-based Peerless Camera Company and opened a new chain of camera shops across the East Coast. In Philadelphia, they subdivided a portion of the Robinson Store, with a separate storefront designed by Philip Mastrin [Fig. 35].⁵⁶ The remainder of Gruen & Krummeck's original design appears to have survived intact until its ultimate closure in 1964, when the Grayson-Robinson Company declared bankruptcy and shuttered their entire nationwide chain. Most of their core Grayson and Robinson stores were located in traditional downtowns; in a damning diagnosis of the proverbial "100 percent location," officials blamed the company's collapse on "long-term, high-rental leases that were no longer heavily patronized."⁵⁷ The neon Robinson script sign and the

⁵⁶ Sloane, Leonard, "7th Ave. Ponders Grayson-Robinson Plight," *New York Times*, Nov. 15, 1964, p. 1; Application for Zoning Permit #53363F, 1020 Market Street, Aug. 22, 1958.

⁵⁷ Sloane, p. 13.

remaining original arcade entrance were removed during the building's subsequent conversion to a Kiddie City toy store, which occupied the building through the early 1990s.⁵⁸

Conclusion: Gruen's (and Krummeck's) Legacy

For two years after parting with the Grayson-Robinson Company, Gruen & Krummeck continued to attract retail clients, but the firm's focus had shifted decisively away from traditionally-sited urban shops. Both their Wynn Furniture store (Los Angeles, 1947) and their Milliron's department store (Los Angeles, 1948) were stand-alone buildings designed explicitly for the automobile; the former was described as a "roadside display case," while the later— the firm's first suburban department store commission— was celebrated as a model "department store of tomorrow" for its autocentric design and rooftop parking scheme.⁵⁹ It was a direction that Victor Gruen would continue to explore for the remainder of his career. Over the course of the next two decades, Gruen's role in the development of suburbia— both as an architect and a critic— grew exponentially, from contracts for individual stores, to plans for integrated multi-tenant shopping centers, to the first modern shopping mall, to downtown redevelopment plans in response to suburban flight. In the process, he would become one of the single most consequential architects, planners, and urban theorists of the 20th century.

Today, Gruen's stature as the "Father of the Shopping Mall" has tended to overshadow Gruen & Krummeck's earlier role in the development of modern commercial architecture in an urban setting— a context that, for much of the United States, represented modernism's point of first contact. Likewise, Gruen's later accomplishments have also overshadowed the role of Elsie Krummeck in the Gruen & Krummeck partnership, which disbanded following the couple's divorce in 1950. By all accounts, the firm was a true design partnership that leaned heavily on

⁵⁸ Ironically, a 1969 application for a new Kiddie City sign in place of the original Robinson script sign was rejected by the Philadelphia Art Commission for being "excessive in size, garish, and inappropriate to the architecture of the building." Ann A. Miller to Thomas F. Connor, March 28, 1969, Philadelphia Zoning Archive, 1020 Market Street File.

⁵⁹ "Modern store is roadside display case," *Chain Store Age*, October 1947, p. 212; HArldwick, p. 95.

Krummeck's background in sculpture and exhibit design; Krummeck also produced the majority of the firm's presentation renderings.⁶⁰ The curved, sculptural lines characteristic of much of Gruen & Krummeck's work, including the Philadelphia Robinson's, do not appear either in Gruen's early Viennese or New York designs, nor in any of his post-partnership work. Following the couple's divorce, Krummeck continued her career as a prolific artist and industrial designer, creating popular wallpaper and fabric prints, toys, and architectural fixtures and furnishings, including Los Angeles International Airport's original concrete planters.⁶¹

Gruen & Krummeck, even without taking all of their subsequent accomplishments into consideration, still stand as an accomplished and influential firm of national significance. Though their Grayson-Robinson designs were far from their only contribution to modern architecture, as a body of work, these stores mark a uniquely significant threshold in the evolution of the commercial and cultural landscape in America. Only two of the firm's Robinson and Grayson stores are known to survive; of these, the Robinson store in Philadelphia retains by far the most integrity, and despite alterations to the building's storefronts and signage, survives as an evocative and characteristic example of their work.⁶²

Philadelphia's former Robinson Store clearly reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style, was designed by an architectural firm of national impact, and exemplifies a dynamic period in the cultural and economic evolution of Philadelphia's most important commercial corridor. For these reasons, the building merits listing on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places.

⁶⁰ Gruenbaum, Victor and Krummeck, Elsie, "Face to Face," *Apparel Arts*, June 1940, pp. 52-55; Gruen, Peggy, "More About My Mother," afterward to Gruen, Victor and Baldauf, Anette, *Shopping Town: Memoiren eines Stadtplaners (1903-1980)*. Vienna: Bohlau Verlag, 2014, pp. 393-395.

⁶¹ "Elsie Krummeck Crawford."

⁶² The other known surviving Grayson's, located at 3657 Crenshaw Boulevard in Los Angeles, has been heavily altered. See especially Herman, Daniel, "Victor Gruen Today," *L.A. Forum*, Issue 7. <http://laforum.org/article/victor-gruen-today/>



ILLUMINATING ENGINEERING

Including Transactions of the Illuminating Engineering Society

VOL. LXII, No. 1

ILLUMINATING ENGINEERING

JANUARY, 1947



JANUARY, 1947

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