

[Back to index](#)

**RICHARD LONGSTRETH,**  
*The Drive-In, the Supermarket, and the Transformation of Commercial Space in Los Angeles, 1914-1941*

(Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1999).

by  
**Matthew Hilton**  
(University of Birmingham UK)

One of the most peculiar business experiments to be found in the history of retailing is perhaps the 'drive-in' general market, developed in the city of the automobile, Los Angeles, in the 1920s and 1930s. Shoppers pulled in off the main boulevards and into L or U-shaped parking lots surrounded by a small number of general stores with open fronts. The car took the consumer directly to the shop, saving the housewife or returning commuter the trouble of both finding a place to park and the perceived indignity of struggling with a large bag of groceries. Although it was generally impractical for orders to be given directly from the driving seat, shoppers were helped at each store by assistants who placed the goods directly in the car, provoking one contemporary commentator to describe the 'drive-ins' as 'stores the road passes through'.

Now almost forgotten, the architectural historian Richard Longstreth eloquently demonstrates the importance of such short-lived phenomena to the history of modern retailing. They began with the extension of the petrol filling station in the 1910s into the 'super-service station' that enabled customers to purchase a variety of car accessories and services with their fuel. Severe competition among oil companies and independent traders to capture the expanding and affluent South Californian middle classes led to the emergence of more diverse 'drive-ins' in the 1920s where the central or corner filling pumps were surrounded by a range of general provision stores or 'departments'. Shortly afterwards, the depression of the 1930s gave rise to another (and expected to be short-lived) retailing establishment, the supermarket, as entrepreneurs sought to sell vast quantities of groceries at rock-bottom prices to necessarily thrifty car-owning families. These required far more space to be given to parking facilities and were thus situated on cheaper land nearer residential areas, away from the city centre. As chain stores saw the benefits of intensive large-scale sales and the popularity of self-service buying, the drive-in and supermarket retailing concepts were merged to create, from the 1940s onwards, the out-of-town, car-focussed shopping centre.

Longstreth's attractively packaged volume provides a well-researched and extensively detailed history of these developments. However, it is not an economic history of the emergence of the different stores though he is keen to stress the business 'pragmatism' which lies behind his narrative of change. Instead, Longstreth's focus is on the changing architecture of the drive-in and the supermarket, and he places much attention on the relationship between 'interior' (shop) and 'exterior' (road) space as architects sought to accommodate the car within the premises of the retail establishment. A comprehensive collection of photographs provides the perfect illustration to this thesis, the 165 images almost providing their own visual story independently of the text.

It would have been useful had Longstreth chosen to locate his work within some of the debates common to the history of retailing. His discussion of the impact of Los Angeles developments on the rest of the nation remain all too brief and there is a tendency within the final chapter to catalogue the divergences from the dominant trend when the early emphasis on the cultural impact of the drive-in and the supermarket would have still been welcome. But overall, this is a fine case study which has many broader implications. Most prominently, it establishes that the social and cultural consequences of the out-of-town shopping centre were just as significant to the twentieth century urban landscape as the emergence of the department store had been to the nineteenth.

*Reprinted courtesy of Business History Review*