

## Citesurvey

# From Neiman's to Macy's

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Neiman-Marcus Galleria store, 1969, Hellmuth, Obata and Kassabaum and Neuhaus and Taylor, architects



Macy's Galleria store, 1986, Hellmuth, Obata and Kassabaum, architects

The opening of Galleria III last year marked the end of a number of things: the end of the growth of the Galleria complex itself, now stretching the full extent of its 1,200-foot superblock, as well as the end of the period of rapid economic growth over which the complex was developed. From the Galleria's first "anchor" building to its last, the distance between Neiman-Marcus and Macy's also marks the end of a radical re-evaluation of architecture that has taken place over the past 20 years. For more than anything else the new Macy's seems to mark the victory of postmodern architecture as it has come to be embraced by corporate development in Houston. Having put up so many buildings in recent years, Houston has become *the* city of postmodern architecture. It seems important to begin to evaluate this "new" style, and judge its idea in light of realized construction.

The Galleria offers a unique opportunity for such an evaluation. In one of the seminal theoretical tracts of postmodernism, *Learning From Las Vegas*, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Stephen Izenour cite the then (1972) newly completed Neiman-Marcus as an example of the impoverishment of modern architecture. There is a short section entitled "From La Tourette to Neiman-Marcus," in which the adaptation of the profile of Le Corbusier's monastery is traced through a succession of rather vulgar copies, ending with what is for the author the most vulgar of them all – the Neiman-Marcus Galleria store by Hellmuth, Obata and Kassabaum and Neuhaus and Taylor (1969). The section is, as it was intended to be, an alarming instance of trickle-down Brutalism that Venturi naturally suggests to be a misappropriation of Le Corbusier's work. At the end of the section he offers an alternative – a kind of prescription for a postmodern department store:

*We do not criticize these replications of a classical masterpiece (La Tourette) in a different place for a different use, although we suggest the replication would have been done better if it had been accepted philosophically and used wittily; as in the case of a Beaux Arts Department Store designed after an Italian Palazzo.*

It has taken a remarkably short amount of time – 15 years – for Venturi to get his palazzo department store: the new Macy's appears to have followed the prescription. The recent overhaul in the profession to its new "post" period is thus given physical form in the Galleria. In the short walk from Neiman-Marcus to Macy's, from monastery to palazzo, from "duck" to "decorated shed," from modern to postmodern, there are tangible lessons to be learned about the final effectiveness of the stylistic overhaul.

Or, one should immediately say, the *ineffectiveness* of this overhaul. For it is striking that, having walked from Neiman-Marcus to Macy's, one seems to have arrived at the same place. The first and most obvious impression is that the banality characteristic of the suburban department store has in no way been architecturally overcome. The differences in the real experience of these two "anchors" is almost negligible. How one accounts for this in a period of allegedly significant change in professional attitudes is important. Post-*what?* is the question that is raised by the comparison.

No one could argue about the persuasiveness of Venturi's argument concerning trickle-down when faced with the trivialization of one of Le Corbusier's most important accomplishments. In its translation from a Dominican monastery to a retail outlet, much was lost as the crassness of consumer society and, in this case, a very poignant spiritual leveling came into play. In pursuing Venturi's alternative, however, the replication of another, more appropriate, masterpiece seems by now highly suspect. If the association of an upscale Houston shopper with a monk is acknowledged to be inappropriate, one can hardly say that association with nobility is any more desirable or true, at least as far as architecture is concerned. One suspects however, that the silliness of such an argument might be concealing a larger problem.

Standing on the corner of West Alabama Avenue and Sage Road, surveying the new Macy's tripartite division,

monumental portals, simulated stone quoins, massive staircase to piano-nobile (perfume counter), moulding profiles, and fake rustication, there is a great doubt about the architectural merits of this palazzo department store cum "decorated shed." At best, the awkward translation from palace to store seems in no obvious way superior to the translation made from the monastery 20 years ago. The trivialization of the "masterpiece" that is architecture, has not been avoided. On the contrary, the high kitsch of Macy's makes an even grosser caricature of the model, if only because it is more explicit in its reference. One finally must say that Venturi's argument for an alternative model appears to be entirely naive and ineffectual in the face of those forces that determine the architecture of our day. It now seems that such arguments are false, as they essentially avoid the more difficult issues of an inevitably reductive trickle-down process.

I would like to suggest that this naivité goes beyond this specific instance and applies to postmodernism as a whole as it has come to be built, particularly within a corporate milieu. Architecture's long and professionally difficult march from Neiman-Marcus to Macy's seems hardly to have been rewarded. For all the upheaval in the state of the art, gallons of ink spilt, symposiums, colloquiums, heated debate, careers ruined, heroes slain, and new prophets raised, trickle-down remains trickle-down with very little that is architecture surviving. The not-so-surprising fact that both Neiman-Marcus and Macy's were designed by Hellmuth, Obata and Kassabaum only confirms the fact that nothing of substance has changed here. Academic and professional circles can argue themselves silly over modernism versus postmodernism and palazzo versus monastery, but the demands of the "operation" continue and it seems clear from the present examples that these demands are hostile to architecture.

What can, perhaps, be learned in the journey from Neiman-Marcus to Macy's is the profession's recent preoccupation with false problems. It is now apparent that debate over appropriate models, or superficial changes in style, are irrelevant to the reductive demands of the market, and this irrelevancy ought to give thinking architects cause for concern. The failure of the new Macy's indicates that the demand for legitimate architectural and urban expression, if serious, must shift outside the bounds of recent debates. ■