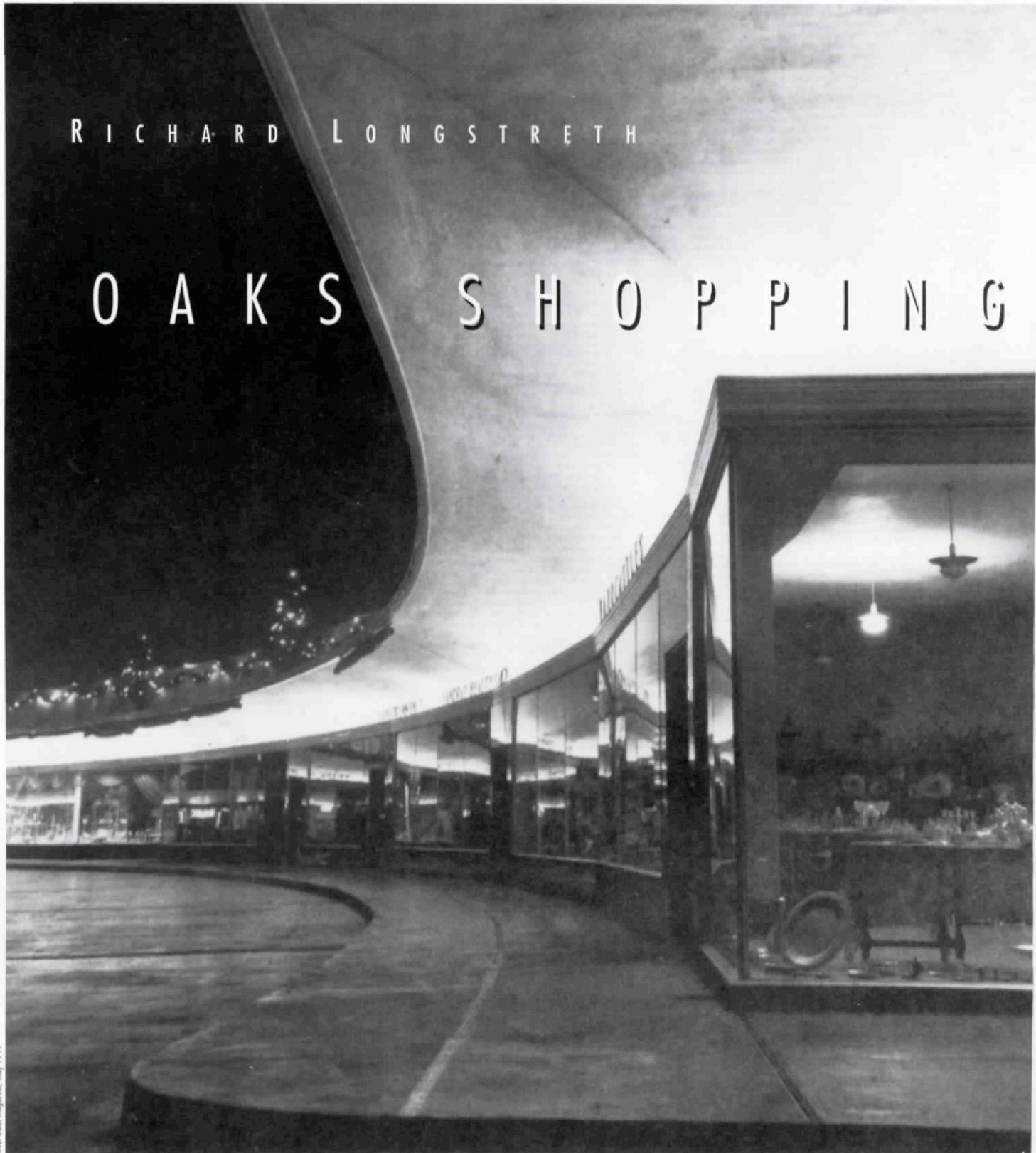


R I C H A R D L O N G S T R E T H

R I V E R O A K S S H O P P I N G



River Oaks magazine, May 1941

River Oaks Shopping Center, night view, Christmastime, Oliver C. Winston, architect with Stayton Nunn & Milton McGinty, associated architects, 1937.

The shopping center that lies at the intersection of West Gray Avenue and South Shepherd Drive on the eastern edge of River Oaks seems to be of a kind that is so ubiquitous in the urban landscape that it is easily taken for granted. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of developments more or less like it line arterial routes in cities of all sizes coast to coast. Yet when its first stores opened in November 1937, the River Oaks Shopping Center was an anomaly in Houston and of a type extremely rare in the United States. One of the most ambitious of its kind, the project became a

this kind of business development held for the future.

The River Oaks Center was the brainchild of Hugh Potter, a key figure in the organization of the River Oaks Corporation by Potter and Will and Mike Hogg in 1924.¹ That enterprise introduced to Houston the concept of a large-scale, comprehensively planned residential community that created a matrix for growth not only through unified physical arrangement, but also through covenants, guidelines, and review — all effected through the River Oaks Corporation. The developers sought to create high land values by controlling a sizable tract on which a number of amenities were provided and at the same time to prevent the kinds of development that were considered undesirable by the prosperous target clientele. Having a business center — called a community center in 1930s Houston — was an important part of the

the foremost advocate of the shopping center as a component of planned communities, did more to advance the concept of the complex as an integrated business development than anyone else of his generation. Believing that it was essential for a single party to own, build, and manage the center, he carefully selected tenants so that each would reinforce the business presence of the others and so that the assemblage would provide the optimal scope of goods and services for the target audience. He also insisted that the developer should undertake an aggressive merchandising policy for the complex to attract consumers from beyond his tract as well as from within it. Nichols's ideas began to take concrete form after World War I with several neighborhood centers and, most importantly, with the Country Club Plaza, a 250-store complex whose plans were unveiled in 1922 and on which construc-

C E N T E R



River Oaks Shopping Center, aerial view, ca. 1939.

veritable icon among real estate developers, architects, and planners who championed the shopping center as the optimal means of guiding business growth in outlying sections of the city. The scheme was a hybrid of projects in Kansas City, Washington, D.C., and, perhaps, Los Angeles, synthesizing what were considered the strengths of each. At a pivotal point in the evolution of the shopping center, after the path-breaking experiments had been made and not long before the type became a standard form of retail development, River Oaks was the nation's most publicized example of the genre, a potent symbol of the promise

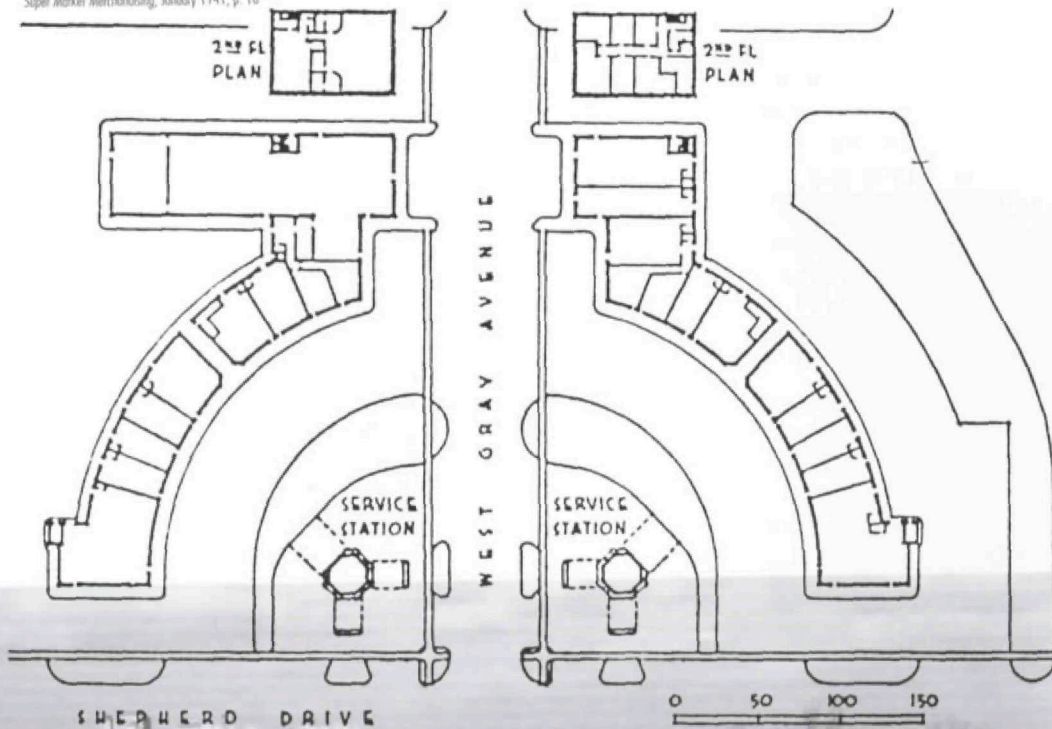
strategy and represented both sides of the planning equation. Such a complex was an amenity that gave residents the convenience of having basic goods and services nearby. To further its appeal, the center should harmonize with the residential character of the area. At the same time, it should stand apart from the dwellings it served. Business was to be contained and clearly never be able to encroach upon the domestic environs — a fear harbored by many affluent householders of the period.²

In determining the scope of the River Oaks project, Potter and the Hogg brothers examined a number of residential developments across the country. Probably the most influential source was the enormous Country Club District in Kansas City, Missouri, under development by J. C. Nichols since 1908. By the early 1920s, Nichols had risen to national prominence among residential real estate entrepreneurs, and the Country Club District was widely considered the preeminent example of its kind. Nichols,

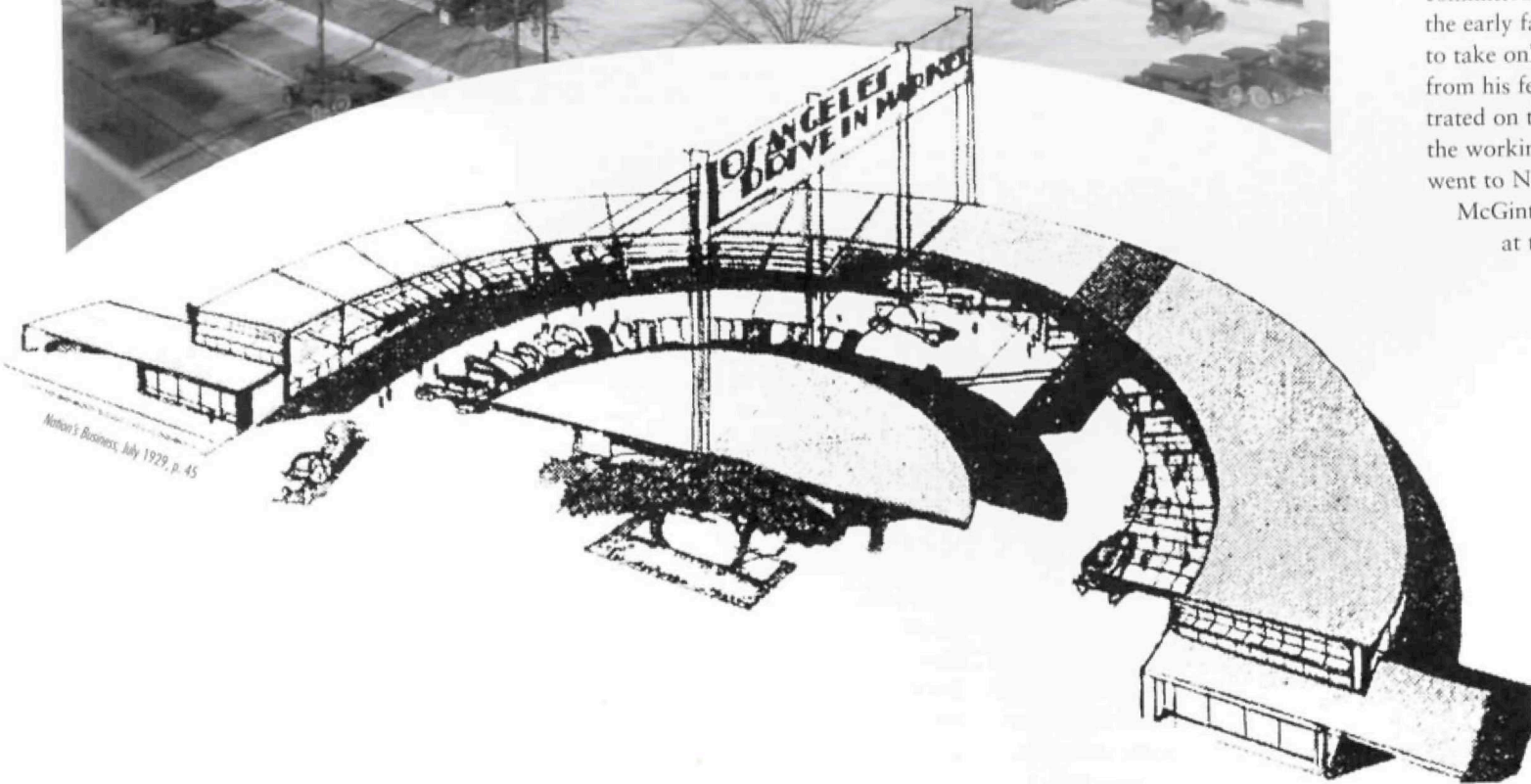
tion commenced the following year.³ The Plaza served as a wellspring in the evolution of the shopping-center concept over the next quarter century and as a physical model for a number of centers for at least half that period.

Land was set aside for a business center during the early stages of the River Oaks planning. Much like the Plaza, the new center lay at a major entrance to the tract, the intersection of Westheimer Road and River Oaks Boulevard (now the site of St. John the Divine church). Construction was delayed, however, until such time as the local population was sufficient to sustain the ensemble. When Potter assumed complete control of the River Oaks Corporation in 1930, he abandoned the project, perhaps because he thought the site was too small and too close to residential lots.⁴ A new location was selected at a strategic point on the eastern edge of the tract. The retail center would not only be separated from River Oaks by a north-south arterial, Shepherd Drive, but would also straddle

Super Market Merchandising, January 1941, p. 18



courtesy Prints and Photographic Division, Library of Congress



Nation's Business, July 1929, p. 45

West Gray, a primary route to and from downtown.

The first phase of the complex was to provide some specialty as well as everyday goods and services. Buildings were to be added along West Gray as demand grew, eventually to result in an important nucleus of commercial activity for the metropolitan area, echoing the role of Kansas City's Plaza. Preliminary studies for the shopping center began around 1932, but the scheme was not finalized until five years later, when Potter judged that the economic climate had sufficiently improved.⁵

The delay proved crucial to the shopping center's design and, ultimately, to its national recognition. Two young Houston architects, Oliver C. Winston and Edward Arrantz, were commissioned to prepare plans and spent several months developing studies. Arrantz died soon thereafter, and his place in the firm was taken by Stayton Nunn. In 1934, Winston became project planner for the Public Works Administration's housing division in Washington, D.C. Winston's "unusual interest" in the River Oaks project and what must have been a good working relationship with his client led Potter to invite him to complete the process once an investor, H. G. Frost, committed to financing the enterprise in the early fall of 1936. Winston was able to take only a month's leave of absence from his federal post, so while he concentrated on the design, responsibility for the working drawings and supervision went to Nunn and his associate, Milton McGinty.⁶ Whatever its characteristics

at the outset, the scheme probably changed to a marked degree after it was reactivated, with results that were quite unlike any retail complex undertaken by Nichols and that were a conspicuous departure from the norm in Houston.

The federal city provided an important basis for the change. In 1930, Washington became home to the first successful adaptation of the shopping center as an integrated business development to the drive-in concept, in which off-street accommodation of customer

Top: River Oaks Shopping Center, plan, ca. 1939.
Center: Park and Shop, Washington, D.C., Arthur Heaton, architect, 1930.
Above: Drive-In Market project, Richard Neutra, architect, ca. 1928.



Bethesda-Chevy Chase Shopping Center, Bethesda, Maryland, Porter & Locke, architects, 1936-37. Right wing now demolished. Photo early 1940s.

automobiles is the primary determinant of site size and location as well as the arrangement of buildings. The Washington complex, called the Park and Shop, consisted of ten stores serving routine consumer needs and organized around a forecourt with parking space for 44 cars.⁷ The scheme was quickly embraced by architects, planners, and others concerned with reform in housing and community design, for the same basic reason that Nichols championed the shopping-center concept: it was an ideal antidote to strip development, capable of containing commerce and making it a compatible neighbor in residential surroundings. The editors of *Architectural Record* cited the Park and Shop as a model for retail design in their May 1932 issue, as did Clarence Stein and Catherine Bauer in a February 1934 *Record* article that was among the most widely read on the subject for the period.⁸

Through his work at the PWA, Winston undoubtedly understood the esteem accorded to the Park and Shop in housing circles. He also probably knew that the concept was gaining rapid acceptance in the marketplace. Because of the Depression the Park and Shop had no immediate successors, but seven similar complexes were begun in the Washington area in 1935 and 1936. Given his federal responsibilities and his renewed charge at River Oaks, Winston is likely to have inspected at least some of these projects firsthand and perhaps talked to the architects and real estate brokers involved with them.

In its final form, the River Oaks center was bifurcated, with buildings on either side of West Gray Avenue. The arrangement was probably stipulated at the outset by Potter and reflected the planning approach taken at the Country Club Plaza and a number of its offspring that rendered the complex a visual portal to the community. But Winston's design broke from this pattern in all other aspects. The pair of main buildings were mirror images, each framing a forecourt, as if two of the Washington centers were set face to face. True to the drive-in concept, facilitating onsite automobile circulation and parking generated the specifics of the layout. However, the architect avoided simply reiterating the Park and Shop model. Two of the most distinctive features of Winston's scheme, its abstract, minimalist vocabulary and its semicircular form, which gave motorists entering the forecourt a clear view of all the stores, imparted a sense of fluidity that

stood in distinct contrast to even the least historicizing Washington centers then realized, where form and composition engendered a feeling of static reserve.

The River Oaks storefronts were indeed a departure from retail design generally. The conventions of streamlining were rejected for the kind of dynamic interplay between nonreferential elements, volume, and light championed by the avant-garde.

Among the likely sources of inspiration for the salient expressive qualities of River Oaks was the work of Richard Neutra, then the most well-known, forceful, and accomplished advocate of avant-garde modernism in the United States. Neutra's oeuvre provided a specific precedent for the Houston center with several unrealized designs for drive-in markets, the southern California forebears of the Park and Shop. The semicircular form that was the leitmotif of River Oaks is an enlarged version of that found in one of Neutra's most distinctive and publicized market projects of the late 1920s.⁹ As Neutra recommended for his markets, Winston treated the front as a transparent surface, using signs and roof canopy above to particularly dramatic effect at night through coved lighting. The corner filling station, seldom incorporated in Washington centers but common to drive-in markets, including Neutra's design, further suggests that California examples provided a point of departure. Winston may well have known Neutra's market schemes when the initial studies for River Oaks were done, but it is doubtful whether Potter would have accepted so unorthodox a solution at the time. Modernism in the commercial realm had become much more widely accepted by the public in 1937. Most important, however, the Washington centers validated the economic soundness of applying the drive-in concept to the shopping center. The appeal of offstreet parking to consumers more than compensated for the cost. Thus through the combined efforts of an enlightened developer and a talented architect, the ideas of J. C. Nichols and housing reformers, as well as examples in Washington centers and California, were fused in an arresting design that was at once heralded as a Houston showpiece.

The River Oaks Center was indeed a departure from local patterns of outlying retail development, even though the city could boast of several innovations in that sphere over the previous decade and a half. Houston played a pioneering role in the invention of the supermarket, which, like the shopping center, was an integrated business operation of substantial size and oriented to residential areas rather than the urban core. As early as 1923, one of the city's major food retailers, Henke & Pillot, built such a market on an unprecedented scale (over 30,000 square feet) in the South End at 2800 Travis Street. Two subsequent emporia built in 1926 and 1931 (3000 Washington Avenue, 4008 Polk Avenue) were bolstered by enormous parking lots, one with space for 450 cars. A major competitor, J. Weingarten, built more units, each somewhat smaller, but likewise generously endowed with offstreet parking.¹⁰ Only Los Angeles could boast so many advanced examples of the type. By the time construction began on River Oaks, work also was under way as well on the Tower Theater and its adjoining community center, the first of several complexes developed by the Interstate Circuit of Dallas.¹¹ Yet none of these endeavors possessed the River Oaks Center's dynamic spatial qualities or its sophisticated abstract expression. Nor did they offer the same scope of goods and services.

Appreciation for the novelty of the River Oaks Shopping Center was bolstered by an unceasing barrage of newspaper accounts published between 1937 and 1940, most of them undoubtedly the work of the River Oaks Corporation. Collectively this coverage formed one of the most extensive compendia of arguments for shopping-center development to be found during the decades between the wars.¹² Potter stressed the need to relate the complex to residential districts, the importance of physically containing commercial activities the convenience afforded by offstreet parking, the value of harmonious design, and the benefits of putting quality products and services in a single location — as if the shopping center were a new household product. In fact

he hoped it would become a magnet, not just for residents of River Oaks but for prosperous citizens throughout the city. Not the least of the project's contributions to the development of the type was in demonstrating how the drive-in arrangement of a neighborhood center such as the Park and Shop could be adapted to serve a more extensive retail program.

As Potter targeted a large audience for River Oaks, so he structured the tenancy to address more than daily shopping needs. The published accounts stressed that years of research and thought lay behind the "scientific" planning of the complex to give "community service comparable with the large shopping centers [i.e., shopping districts] and with more ease and greater convenience than the neighborhood store of a few years ago." Depictions implied that the center could offer an alternative to shopping downtown. The complex was heralded as providing "a complete community service of the highest caliber" at no greater expense than other areas with lower rents. It also had the added advantage of the one-stop shopping. The claim that River Oaks offered "every article needed in the household or for the family" was at least in part borne out by its tenant mix:¹³ besides stores purveying basic goods and services, there were a number specializing in clothes, gifts, and antiques, as well as the quarters of a dance studio, an interior decorator, a builder, and the architecture firm of Nunn & McGinty. Potter minced no words in stating his belief that River Oaks combined the best aspects of central and outlying retail districts and was superior to them both in having a unified merchandising structure and harmonious ambiance. The center's physical appearance, he suggested, was emblematic of the quality of services it rendered.

In 1940, Potter joined J. C. Nichols and other colleagues in forming the Urban Land Institute, a Washington-based organization devoted to improving the standards of new development. He served as the group's third president (1943-44) and in 1950 succeeded Nichols as chairman of the institute's Community Builders' Council, which had become the principal proponent of, and source of information about, shopping centers. In large part because of his efforts, the River Oaks complex continued to be touted as a model design for nearly a decade; even after shopping-center design began to undergo dramatic,

fast-paced change following World War II, the scheme was lauded as a pioneer in the field.¹⁴

The River Oaks storefronts provided a popular model for retail buildings locally over the next decade, but the complex had little direct impact on postwar shopping-center design.¹⁵ Bifurcated plans were rejected by most developers because the intervening street complicated vehicular

and pedestrian circulation. Nor was the semicircular form often repeated; the curvature necessitated costly details and reduced usable space in the forecourt and selling areas alike. Most important, while River Oaks seemed an ambitious project for a city escaping the throes of the Depression, it fell far short of the demands of postwar expansion. To meet that challenge, the shopping center had to be conceived anew.

River Oaks nevertheless was significant in providing a basis for that transformation. In the late 1930s, when the shopping center was still considered an unusual venture, perhaps one of limited application, and when the drive-in concept was likewise seen as experimental for most buildings other than automobile-service facilities, River Oaks offered convincing evidence that such ventures had a sound practical basis. Here was a concrete example of the purportedly better suburban world of the future, created by a nationally distinguished real estate developer. In the difficult process of redefining the shopping center after the war, River Oaks was among the most advanced points of departure. No other example so successfully presented the shopping-center concept, crafted in a vocabulary that exuded promise, as a solution that appeared not only realistic but inevitable. ■



Rooflines, River Oaks Shopping Center.

1 For the development of River Oaks, see Don Riddle, "'Homes to Last for All Time': The Story of Houston's River Oaks," *National Real Estate Journal*, March 4, 1929, p. 28, and Charles Orson Cook and Barry J. Kaplan, "Civic Elites and Urban Planning: Houston's River Oaks," *East Texas Historical Journal* 25:2 (1977), pp. 29-37.

2 For background on the origins of the shopping center as a concept, see Richard Longstreth, "The Neighborhood Shopping Center in Washington, D.C., 1930-1941," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, March 1992, pp. 5-11; and Longstreth, *City Center to Regional Mall: Architecture, the Automobile, and Retailing in Los Angeles, 1920-1950* (Cambridge: MIT Press, forthcoming), chap. 6.

3 Richard Longstreth, "J. C. Nichols, the Country Club Plaza, and Notions of Modernity," *Harvard Architecture Review* 5 (1986), pp. 120-35; William S. Worley, *J. C. Nichols and the Shaping of Kansas City* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press), 1990.

4 Until construction of the Lamar-River Oaks shopping center across River Oaks Boulevard in 1948, the only building on the site was a 1927 structure that contained the River Oaks Corporation offices and several shops.

5 See "City Planning Needed, Potter Tells Rotarians," *Houston*, October 1936, pp. 14-15. Final plans for the shopping center were made between November 1936 and January 1937. Only one of the two units was to be constructed at first, but Potter decided that existing conditions warranted erection of both simultaneously. See "River Oaks Community Center Rushes Plans on Two Units," *Houston Post*, January 10, 1937, sec. 3, p. 6, and *Houston Post*, February 7, 1937, sec. 3, p. 7. Work was completed by the year's end. A theater was added to the complex in 1939.

6 Letter from Hugh Potter to Oliver Winston, October 4, 1936. This and other correspondence between the two parties over the next three months helps indicate the complicated sequence of the River Oaks Center's design. I am grateful to Mrs. Oliver Winston of Hanover, New Hampshire, for sharing this material with me. Much additional information was supplied by Milton and Burke McGinty (interview, May 8, 1989). The shopping center was among the few buildings Winston realized. Most of his career was spent in the public sector in planning and administration. In 1939 he became a regional director of the U.S. Housing Authority, and later he was executive director of the Housing Authority of Baltimore.

7 Longstreth, "Neighborhood Shopping Center," pp. 11-17. At more or less the same time, plans were unveiled in Dallas for a much larger complex,

Highland Park Village, which had its buildings organized around a parking plaza. See "Construction Under Way on Store Village," *Dallas Morning News*, April 6, 1930, society section, p. 8. This arrangement, however, was traditionally inspired — by courthouse squares in the region — and was quite unlike that of the Park and Shop. Beyond helping to validate the shopping-center concept, it is doubtful whether Highland Park Village had a direct influence on River Oaks.

8 "Drafting and Design Problems: Neighborhood Shopping Centers," *Architectural Record*, May 1932, pp. 325-32; Clarence Stein and Catherine Bauer, "Store Buildings and Neighborhood Shopping Centers," *Architectural Record*, February 1934, pp. 175-87.

9 Neutra's designs for and ideas about the drive-in market were featured prominently in a series of trade articles by Willard Morgan published in *American Builder*, *Chain Store Review*, and *Nation's Business*. Winston may not have known of these pieces, but he probably would have seen the scheme published in the June 1929 issue of *Architectural Record* (p. 606). Milton McGinty's brother and associate, Burke, recalled that this scheme was well known among the students at the Rice Institute's Department of Architecture, where Winston taught prior to his move east, during the 1930s (interview with Milton and Burke McGinty). For background on the drive-in market, see Richard Longstreth, "The Perils of a Parkless Town," in Martin Wachs and Margaret Crawford, eds., *The Car and the City: The Automobile, the Built Environment, and Daily Urban Life* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), pp. 141-53, 310-13, and Longstreth, "Innovation Without Paradigm: The Many Creators of the Drive-in Market" in Thomas Carter, ed., *Images of an American Land: Vernacular Architecture Studies in the Western United States* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), pp. 231-64.

10 *Houston Post*, November 30, 1923, pp. 6-7, December 7, 1926, pp. 7-9, and December 12, 1931, Henke & Pillot section; Charles N. Tunnell, "Henke & Pillot Supermarket Grew From Houston Public's Demand," *Super Market Merchandising*, February 1937, pp. 3-5; Abe Weingarten, "Designing Stores for Maximum Display," *Chain Store Age*, administra-

tion edition, June 1933, pp. 41-43, 49; "Meats and Groceries United in New Weingarten's Market," *Chain Store Age*, grocery edition, February 1936, p. 20; *Houston*, November 1938, p. 49.

11 See "The Store-Theater Idea," *Freehold* 8 (April 1941), pp. 32-38.

12 National coverage of the center before World War II includes "Suburban Shopping Centers," *National Real Estate Journal*, December 1938, p. 29; "Forum: Shopping for the Upper Classes," *Freehold*, January 15, 1939, pp. 54-57; and "Community Shopping Centers," *Architectural Record*, June 1940, pp. 102, 114-18, reprinted as "Community Shopping Center," *Super Market Merchandising*, January 1941, pp. 18-20. Many valuable details, as well as insights on Potter's intentions, are provided in accounts featured in the *Houston Post*, among them "River Oaks Business Houses Follow Curve of Crescent Moons," August 15, 1937, sec. 2, p. 3; "River Oaks Shopping Center Hides Wiring in Buried Conduits," August 22, 1937, sec. 2, p. 7; "River Oaks Shopping is Designed to be Air Cooled," August 26, 1937, p. 22; "River Oaks Business Center in Easy Reach of City's Shoppers," August 29, 1937, sec. 4, p. 7; "Engineer Behind Shopping Center Looks to Future," September 2, 1937, sec. 2, p. 8; "River Oaks Shopping Center Last Word in Construction Style," September 9, 1937, p. 24; "River Oaks Shopping Center Triumph of Long Range Community Plan," January 14, 1940, sec. 2, p. 9; "Personal Service, Neighborly Atmosphere, Greatest Assets of River Oaks Shopping Center," January 26, 1940, sec. 2, p. 15; "River Oaks Community Center Gains Wide Recognition as Model for Shopping Areas," February 4, 1940, sec. 2, p. 9. Stories supplied by merchants in the center appeared in the Sunday real estate section



River Oaks Shopping Center, east block, 1996.

each week from July 10 to December 4, 1938.

During the inter-war decades comparable newspaper coverage was seldom given to buildings of any sort, save major civic undertakings. Searches through papers for Dallas, Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Washington indicate that the publicity given to shopping centers there never approached the same level.

13 "Personal Service," advertisement, *Houston Post*, August 15, 1937, sec. 2, p. 3; "Decentralize for Profit," brochure, ca. 1939, River Oaks scrapbook 15, p. 259, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

14 Hugh Potter "Concepts of Postwar Planning," *Urban Land Institute Bulletin*, February 1943, pp. 7-9; "River Oaks Shopping Center Sets the Pace for Better Stores," *American Builder*, July 1943, pp. 40-41; Robert W. Dowling, "Neighborhood Shopping Centers," *Architectural Forum*, October 1943, p. 77; *Urban Land*, October-November 1944, p. 1; J. Ross McKeever, "Shopping Centers: An Analysis," *Urban Land*

Institute Technical Bulletin 11 (July 1949), pp. 36-37; *The Community Builders Handbook* (Washington: Urban Land Institute, 1950), p. 104. The center was expanded in a less physically integrated fashion after the war, see J. Ross McKeever, "Shopping Centers: Principles and Policies," *Urban Land Institute Technical Bulletin*, 20 (July 1953), 36-37.

15 River Oaks probably influenced a wartime project near Oklahoma City and a hypothetical scheme for the postwar era. See *Urban Land*, August 1944, pp. 1-2; "House-builder Bill Atkinson," *Architectural Forum*, January 1951, p. 129; and Kenneth C. Welch, "More Cars, Superhighways Will Set Post-War Pattern for Commercial Building," *American Builder*, July 1943, p. 39.



River Oaks Theater, 2009 West Gray, Pettigrew & Worley, architects, 1940.



River Oaks Shopping Center, second phase, north side. 1964 West Gray, William G. Farrington, architect, Roy Brogniez, designer, 1948.