



CALIFORNIA

A Brief History of the Mini Mall

BY MARY MELTON

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Even in a city full of parched architecture, few buildings look as thirsty as a mini-mall. Take the one that's baking at Osborne Street and Woodman Avenue in Panorama City this stifling afternoon. A squat rectangle of stucco and drywall, it offers everything we've come to expect in these ubiquitous corner "convenience centers": a pizza parlor and doughnut shop, a music store and forlorn Laundromat. There's the requisite oil-stained parking lot, the brick enclosed dumpster, some spindly little shrubs that cry for water.

The building's faux Italian tiles weigh heavily overhead, and the faade is in desperate need of fresh paint.

Built in 1973, this row of charmless storefronts is thought to be L.A.'s first "modern" mini-mall, and its lack of design and generic bleakness would be appropriated at tens of thousands of other street corners--first in L.A., then Southern California, the United States and, yes, the world.

"You'll find the mini-mall not in the cities of Europe," says Mark Mack, a design professor at UCLA, "but now in the smaller towns and suburban areas. It's a true Los Angeles export." Last year, a Polish developer planned a mini-mall across the street from the Auschwitz concentration camp, with a fast-food outlet, clothing store and supermarket. Outraged Jewish organizations and Holocaust survivors successfully halted construction.

But it's fortunate for the mini-mall that the sun never sets on its empire, because suddenly, it seems, the unthinkable is possible: Mini-malls in Southern California may be headed for obsolescence. Spawned during the oil crisis in the '70s, the mini-mall is now undergoing a crisis of its own--it's being besieged by the "power center," essentially an outdoor version of an indoor mall with big-name chain tenants.

Why, in a landscape just as spread out and car-dominated as the one that gave rise to the mini-mall, is it losing its dominance? And how did it manage to proliferate so relentlessly anyway? As the power centers continue their expansion, as they gobble up entire blocks with their own brand of dull uniformity, suddenly the beleaguered mini-mall seems almost discrete, brought down to human scale. From this arises an unnerving possibility, a thought even more unbelievable than the mini-mall's demise: Might we someday feel nostalgic for it?

Mini-mall nostalgia is, surprisingly, not without precedent. The nation's first mini-malls, premiering in the 1920s during L.A.'s early infatuation with the automobile, were born to beauty. They were called "drive-in markets" and oftentimes were of a whimsical design. There was the since-vanished Mandarin Market in Hollywood: With its giddy, hyper-realized "Oriental" ornamentation and plethora of pagodas, it recalled the grandeur of Grauman's Chinese Theatre. Or consider the Spanish Colonial Revival Chapman Park Market on 6th Street, conceived in 1929 by the designers of the Mayan and El Capitan theaters. However large and ornate, it met standard mini-mall principles: The automobile comes first, the pedestrian second. Immaculately restored with piped-in jazz music and a gurgling fountain, Chapman hints at what the mini-mall could have been, and in its lone case, continues to be.

"They had all the products you wanted under one roof," explains Richard Longstreth, author of "City Center to Regional Mall." "In separate concessions, but all in a single place. The big deal was you could get off the street and drive up to it, get your stuff and go."

The early markets already incorporated prototypal mini mall elements: usually L shaped and situated at a busy intersection, driveway access from two streets, free parking but never enough. The anchor tenant was commonly an independent grocer. About 250 were built in California by the late '20s.

And no, they were not victims of the Depression, but, rather, the supermarket.

Some drive-in markets disappeared, others adapted--recast as body shops or car lots. One survivor in Echo Park was transformed into Casablanca Furniture, barely recognizable as its former self, the Mission Motor-In Market. The Clock Market on Wilshire Boulevard incorporates so many decorative Italian tiles and wrought iron flourishes that it now seems a fitting home to the Beverly Hills Porsche-Audi dealership.

When the mini mall was reborn in the early '70s, it would be in reaction to the proliferation of such postwar mall monoliths as the Lakewood Shopping Center. Shoppers were annoyed at having to search for a parking place, then walk several hundred yards to pick up a goldfish or buy an LP. As eating habits and work schedules became more fragmented, demand grew for the convenient danish and decaf breakfast to go, same-day dry cleaning and 10-minute manicure.

"The fascinating niche they fill," says Alan Hess, an architectural historian and author, "is that they're often mom-and-pop operations." Comic-book dealers, hole-in-the-wall Vietnamese restaurants, bilingual tax preparers, check-cashing services--these businesses simply can't afford the high rents demanded by major malls. The surge of Central American and Asian immigrants into 1970s Los Angeles would provide the mini-mall with eager tenants. (Today, typical mini-mall rents--in the San Fernando Valley, anywhere from 85 cents to \$2 per square foot--still compare favorably to the \$2 to \$6 a square foot the enclosed shopping center might garner.)

The oil crisis would provide the real estate. Hundreds of gas stations in Southern California dried up during the 1973-'74 OPEC embargoes. Oil companies sold off their

abandoned sites cheaply, often to hungry developers who realized that the lots--ideally located at busy intersections across the city--were already zoned for commercial use.

The boom would reach its apex in little more than a decade.

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The mini-mall backlash began in earnest in 1986, when L.A. Councilman Hal Bernson, frustrated that 40 mini-malls had mushroomed in his San Fernando Valley district during the previous 18 months, agonized at yet another City Council discussion of an initial mini-mall ordinance: "By the time this thing gets passed, there won't be any corners left to save."

By 1985, real estate agents and developers estimated there were as many as 3,000 mini-malls in Southern California. Homeowners complained about congestion and litter and insufficient parking, about teenagers with boom boxes and "undesirable" loiterers. Mini-malls soon earned the nickname "pod malls," since they spawned as fast as the mutants in "Invasion of the Body Snatchers."

A series of retaliatory anti-mini-mall edicts went into effect all over L.A. County: in May 1987, a two-month halt on mini-mall construction in Hollywood; a yearlong moratorium in Eagle Rock; blanket bans in San Marino and West Hollywood, restrictions in Beverly Hills and Santa Monica. In November 1988, the L.A. City Council unanimously approved the "mini-mall ordinance," No. 164201, to establish at least some elementary guidelines. Calling it a "desperately needed proposal," then-Mayor Tom Bradley championed the planting of one shade tree per four parking spaces.

"There's not a great deal of flexibility with the building's form," architect Tom Layman admits. "When you look at them, you see signs and glass and cars." His firm, T.W. Layman Associates, designed more than 400 mini-malls in Southern California. He proudly proclaims only one, in Dana Point, "absolutely gorgeous," and another on

Wilshire and Highland an example of “the few successful two-story ones we did.” The challenge with a two-story, Layman says, is simple: “Get the customer to go to the second floor.”

Though his firm still designs about half a dozen a year, Layman says mini-malls reached a saturation point in the early ‘90s. There was the recession and a shortage of empty lots, and really, Layman muses, “how many doughnut shops can you put in the city of Los Angeles?”

Some store owners in Koreatown and South L.A. stood up to defend the mini-mall, however, from a more lethal threat: the 1992 riots. Mini-malls were inviting targets. Driveways were convenient to pull into; huge plate-glass windows easily smashed. Thirty mini-malls were severely damaged or destroyed. Some were rebuilt regardless, this time often constructed of thick cinder block, guarded by 6-foot iron fences and featuring glass storefronts high enough to escape a car’s grill.

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No one company capitalized on the mini-mall dream as prodigiously as La Mancha Development Corp. Since that first structure in Panorama City in 1973, La Mancha has built far more mini-malls in L.A.--at last count, 650--than any competitor. The company’s signs, “For Lease, La Mancha Development, New Shopping Center,” festooned with a Picasso-esque silhouette of a bowlegged Don Quixote grasping his lance, were raised at so many construction sites in the ‘80s that they became more than one Valley kid’s first exposure to Cervantes.

At the height of the mid-’80s boom, when his company completed as many as five projects a month (as compared to 10 a year in the mid-’70s) and its net worth was reported at \$50 million, Sam Bachner, La Mancha’s president, was crowned “mini-mall king.” To this day, Bachner takes exception to the honorific.

“Lots of misnomers have been thrown around and the jargon’s been flipped,” Bachner says. “Mini-malls? Strip malls? We built convenience centers, to give easy access to go in a store and come out.”

Where did “mini-mall” come from? “I don’t know, ‘E.T.’ I think,” Bachner responds. “I’m kidding. Probably some correspondent couldn’t spell convenience so they wrote ‘mini.’ ”

His late partner, Alan Riseman, came up with the La Mancha moniker. “What do you think of when you hear ‘Don Quixote?’ ” Bachner asks.

“Windmills.”

“No, what else? To dream the impossible dream . . .” he bellows in a baritone as he shuffles papers. “Why would anybody put them down?”

Indeed, with the mini-mall harassed by power centers and political mandates, maybe it is time for a reluctant reassessment.

Mini-malls certainly are convenient. They are a refuge for independent shop owners and immigrant entrepreneurs with pockets too shallow for a big mall. Most who profess to hate them probably won’t admit to being closet patrons. Who out there can confess to never relying on a mini mall for dry cleaning? Or videos? Or a bear claw? How many rave restaurant reviews have been clipped about delectable dim sum in Monterey Park or a mind-boggling mole sauce in Pacoima that just happens to be prepared in . . . a mini-mall?

“They provide jobs and opportunity, livings for honest Americans,” says Bachner. “I guess if they’re put down, you’re putting down all the people who shop there.”

Bachner worries, too, about the vilification of another national icon. “Did you know you can burn down the American flag now?” the mini-mall king asks. “I’m not saying you would, but you can.”

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With their escalators and flashy signage and surface ostentation of glass and brass, the rise of the power center might prove more daunting than the mini-mall. “In urban terms, the power centers are much more of a design problem,” says Margaret Crawford, a professor of urban studies at the Southern California Institute of Architecture. “You have these gigantic boxes for stores and a massive parking lot. It’s hard to do anything with them. They don’t fit into the city.”

So the mini-mall, for two decades an aesthetically ugly necessity, might find itself usurped by the Blockbusters, Good Guys and California Pizza Kitchens, which can pay considerably higher rents. “We’re getting all chained out--or chained in,” says Mack of UCLA. “These familiar names need 10,000 square feet”--much more than a mini-mall storefront provides--and space they do have for incidentals fill with Starbucks or Jamba Juices.”

You can justly curse the mini-mall for its shapeless design but you cannot condemn it as the neighborhood’s most generic shopping experience. Trapped in a power center, sipping a cup of Starbucks coffee that tastes and costs exactly the same as the cup of Starbucks coffee you could get a mile away at another power center, you might find yourself yearning for a relatively exotic ambience--overcome by a sudden wave of mini-mall nostalgia.

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Mini-Mall Milestones

1924: First drive-in market built in Glendale.

1928: First full-fledged Ralphs Supermarket erected on Wilshire Boulevard, prefiguring the decline of drive-in markets.

1973: Gas stations across the city go bust during OPEC oil embargo, freeing corner lots at busy intersections for mini-mall development. La Mancha Development Corp. opens its first mini-mall in Panorama City. More than 650 follow.

Sept. 8, 1979: The first Yoshinoya Beef Bowl in a mini-mall opens at the corner of Colorado and Brand boulevards in Glendale.

May, 1986: The American Institute of Architects sponsors the exhibit “Real Problems: Convenience Centers” at the California Museum of Science and Industry.

March 13, 1987: Community activist Kathleen Aberman is arrested when she refuses to come down from the roof of a historic Eagle Rock building that is to be demolished for a mini-mall.

October 27, 1987: Kay Damiano gives birth to a 9-pound, 12-ounce girl in the back seat of a Lincoln Continental in a mini-mall parking lot at Vanowen Street and White Oak Avenue. “I got the best doctor, the best hospital room. I got \$2,000 worth of furniture in a nursery,” her husband, Gene, says afterward. “Why is my baby being born in a parking lot strewn with beer cans?”

Nov. 23, 1988: Councilman Michael Woo castigates Los Angeles as “the mini-mall capital of the world.”

April 2, 1989: Ten percent of respondents to The Times’ “quality of life” poll cite “mini-malls” as “biggest pet peeve,” between “stupid local TV news” at 4% and “potholes” at 16%.

March 1, 1991: The LAPD announces a war on “mini-mall crack,” sold blatantly at an East Hollywood convenience center.

1991: In “Defending Your Life,” Albert Brooks’ character, killed in a car crash and languishing in the afterlife, is informed of the opening of six mini-malls outside Judgment City.

April 29-May 1, 1992: More than 30 mini-malls are seriously damaged or destroyed as riots and fires engulf Los Angeles in the wake of the Rodney King trial verdicts.

1995: In “The Brady Bunch Movie,” the family’s familiar ranch-style house is threatened by a scheming real estate agent who wants to put in a mini-mall.

Oct. 5, 1997: Photographer Catherine Opie’s show opens at the Museum of Contemporary Art, featuring seven black-and-white prints of local mini-malls.

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