

Journal of American Culture

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The American Gasoline Station, 1920 to 1970

by John A. Jakle

The gasoline station has become a common feature in the American landscape, but, aside from the economics of station location, academicians have paid little attention to this feature as a landscape phenomenon.¹ Gasoline stations have served as clear indicators of America's changing architectural and landscape tastes in the twentieth century. They deserve serious attention from historical geographers, architectural historians, and other scholars concerned with the built environment. In this article I describe the structural evolution of the gasoline station between 1920 and 1970 noting the relative popularity of different building types through time. My study is based on a content analysis of illustrations in the *National Petroleum News*, the petroleum industry's leading trade journal.

The Gasoline Station

Gasoline stations (filling stations or service stations as they have also been called) are roadside facilities specially designed to sell gasoline and other products for the automobile such as lubricants, tires, and batteries. Many gasoline stations also offer minor repair services such as motor tuning and tire alignment. Today, there are some 180,000 gasoline stations in the United States, down from the 236,000 recorded in 1969.² Excluded from consideration are garages, car washes, grocery stores, and, indeed, every other type of gasoline sales outlet where major profits derive from activities other than selling gasoline or where gasoline sales are dependent upon a cluster of other activities. Between 1920 and 1970 gasoline stations accounted for approximately forty percent of the total gasoline sales outlets in the United States.³ Although they comprised a minority of the total outlets, the image of the gasoline station dominated the American public's conceptualization of gasoline retailing. Gasoline stations were especially designed to promote gasoline sales and were highly imageable accordingly.

The Gasoline Market

In 1911 the Standard Oil Trust was divided into separate producing and refining companies, each with a well defined retail territory.⁴ Together they owned some ninety percent of the nation's refinery capacity and controlled some eighty-five percent of the total petroleum market, much of it oriented to kerosene and other petroleum products such as candles, household lubricating oils, oils for harnesses and belts, and floor dressings.⁵ With the increasing pop-

ularity of the automobile after 1915, the Standard Oil companies experienced difficulty expanding rapidly enough to serve the new gasoline market, their capital being invested in other product lines. Independent oil producers made substantial gains by orienting initial refinery and marketing investments toward fueling America's new motor cars.⁶ The gasoline station became a prime weapon in this competition.

Where and when the first gasoline station appeared is difficult to establish, for various kinds of "stations" appeared on the American scene between 1907 and 1913. Standard Oil of California opened a station in Seattle in 1907. A feed-line from a main storage tank led to a smaller tank equipped with a glass gauge and valve-controlled hose.⁷ In 1909 an affiliate of the Shell Oil Co. in St. Louis built the first "drive-in" station to be located apart from bulk plant facilities.⁸ The station comprised a small tin shed housing barrels of oil and two converted hot water tanks sporting short lengths of garden hose.⁹ In 1910 the Central Oil Company of Flint, Michigan built the first structure specially designed for gasoline distribution: a large canopy supported by posts covering two driveways separated by a single hand operated pump.¹⁰ Gulf Oil built an architect-designed station in Pittsburgh in 1913. The hexagonal building included a roof cantilevered outward on all sides to cover thirteen electrically operated gasoline pumps. Here the company distributed the first free commercial road maps in the United States.¹¹

Standard of California launched the first chain of gasoline stations in 1914.¹² All thirty-four stations were standardized: small houses with attached canopies, each building uniformly painted and identified by common signs. These stations were located on fenced, landscaped sites and cost from \$500 to \$1500 to build. By 1920 there were approximately 15,000 service stations in the United States: an increase of approximately 1,200 stations per year.¹³ In 1920 most stations were individually owned (owners contracting for the products of one or several oil companies), but company owned and operated stations were rapidly increasing in number. Companies sought to control retail profits by owning stations while, at the same time, adopting carefully contrived gasoline station designs calculated to improve company images. In 1922 Shell Oil supplied 1,841 retail outlets in California, Oregon, and Washington. Only 204 stations (or eleven percent) were company owned, but they accounted for forty-four percent of Shell's gasoline sales in the region.¹⁴ By 1930 most companies had leased their stations to dealers in the face of legislation in Iowa and other states heavily taxing chain store profits. Standardization of building types and uniform color schemes and signage continued through lease agreement.

Through the 1960s the United States enjoyed a surplus of petroleum forcing gasoline prices down to consistently low levels. Price was unimportant in industry competition. The principal producer and refiner set the price of gasoline in each marketing region. Gasoline was freely exchanged between companies to reduce transportation costs and promote the cheapest and most efficient flow of gasoline from refinery to pump. The gasoline of a dozen or more

companies (each championing the unique qualities of its own brand) might actually originate at a single regional refinery. Companies did compete through territorial marketing strategies based on the development of brand consciousness through advertising. Gasoline station design was a critical element in a company's quest for visibility. The standardized station was a most important advertising device by which companies sought to develop sales territories.¹⁵

The Gasoline Station and the *National Petroleum News*

The *National Petroleum News* was founded in 1909 to serve the independent oil producers by promoting open competition in an industry dominated by the Standard Oil Trust.¹⁶ During the 1920s and 1930s the journal provided an important price reporting service. Although the majority of articles concerned exploration and production, considerable emphasis was given to reporting gasoline station innovation. Indeed, the journal sponsored annual gasoline station design contests. After World War II the journal developed as a general news magazine for the oil industry with spin-off publications, including *Petroleum Processing* and *Petroleum Week*, concerned with production and marketing, respectively. Purchased by the McGraw-Hill Publishing Co. in 1953, the *National Petroleum News* switched from a weekly to a monthly format and became exclusively a marketing journal. Despite these various changes, the journal consistently carried advertising and articles oriented to gasoline station owners and operators.

Illustrations in the *National Petroleum News* depicting gasoline stations were systematically sampled across the magazine's entire run to determine prevailing structural types. The following types were identified: 1) the curbside, 2) the shed, 3) the house, 4) the house with canopy, 5) the house with bays, 6) the oblong box (with and without modifications), 7) the small box, 8) the small box with canopy, and 9) the canopy with booth (Fig. 1). These gasoline station types were named for their principal structural features following nomenclature used in the journal.

The Curbside

The term "filling station" first applied to the curbside pumps and underground storage tanks developed by a host of manufacturers about 1915 (Figs. 1 and 2). These "stations" were installed along streets in front of grocery, hardware, and other stores which, carrying household petroleum products, had expanded into gasoline sales. Gasoline, like kerosene, was originally dispensed in tin cans. Pumped from small storage barrels, gasoline was hand poured into automobile tanks from tins. Originally, gasoline was distributed by wholesale jobbers who ran horse drawn tank wagons refilling the gasoline tins kept in private garages, commercial car storage garages, and automobile repair shops. The curbside station was an important innovation. Automobiles were filled mechanically and thus more efficiently and centralized distribution reduced the threat of fire in a community.

After 1920, fire safety ordinances forced curbside stations to close in the larger cities.¹⁷ In 1923 the New York Supreme Court upheld a City of Buffalo zoning ordinance which not only forbid curbside stations, but restricted the locations of other types of gasoline stations as well. The action forced Standard

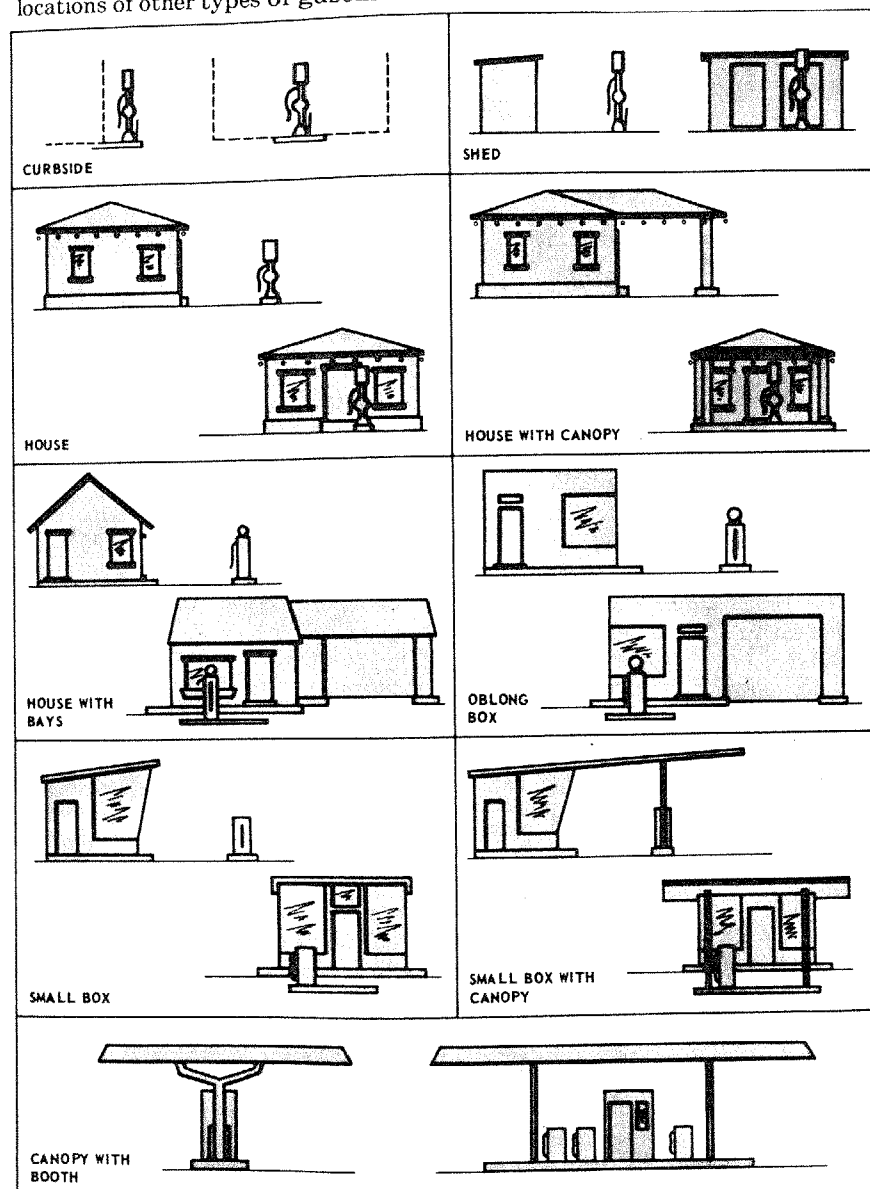


FIGURE 1—Gasoline station types identified by an analysis of illustrations in *National Petroleum News*, 1910 through 1970.

Oil of New York (Socony) to organize a real estate department to acquire gasoline station sites in Buffalo and in the other cities where similar ordinances were expected. Of the approximately 700 gasoline stations then operating in New York State, 600 were curbside stations.¹⁸ Curbside pumps continued to thrive only in rural areas in conjunction with general stores and other roadside businesses.¹⁹

The Shed

The first off-street, drive-in gasoline stations brought a number of structural innovations. Small sheds were built to house lubricating oils, greases, and equipment (Fig. 1). Before 1915 few motorists drove their automobiles in inclement weather as automobiles were not enclosed. Cars were stored during the winter months in cold areas. Thus the sale of gasoline was a "fair weather" activity and little effort was made to protect either the station operator or his customers. Sheds came in a variety of shapes and sizes, but all were utilitarian buildings with little decoration save the advertising signs (Fig. 3). Driveways were usually of dirt or, if improved, of gravel. Some stations were surrounded by board fences to hide the utilitarian metal, clapboard, or tar paper sheds and the clutter of the unimproved driveways. Visually, these early stations had much in common with lumber and coal yards. The sheds, themselves, were storage buildings common to a host of businesses involving the handling of bulk commodities.

The House

In urban places, the early curbside and the shed-type "filling stations" were generally located in and around the central business districts. After 1920

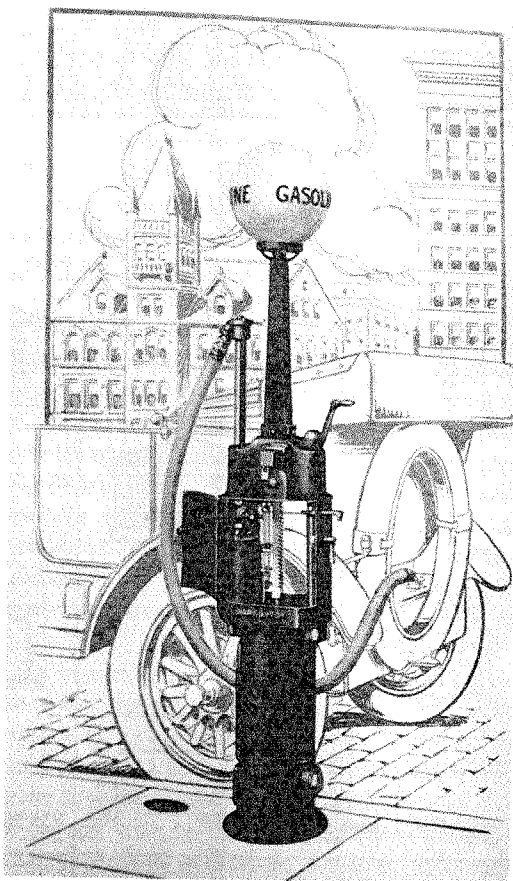


FIGURE 2—A "Curbside" station. Source: advertisement of the Dayton Pump and Manufacturing Co. in *National Petroleum News*, Vol. 7 (Sept., 1915), n.p.



FIGURE 3—A "Shed" station in Pittsburg, Kansas about 1910. Source: *Standolind Record*, Vol. 2 (1921), p. 14.

the oil companies invested heavily in neighborhood "service stations." These stations often intruded first upon the best residential streets where large houses on big lots faced wide, paved thoroughfares. The oil companies sought the large corner lots capable of accommodating the necessary driveways, and accessible to motorists from two streets. Before 1930, stations not only had to attract customers, but they had to be attractive as well. Resistance to the destruction of old houses and the disruption of residential neighborhoods lent support to zoning and other land use controls generally feared by gasoline interests. The oil companies sought to build stations that blended into residential neighborhoods thus to reduce opposition to their real estate practices.

The neighborhood service station was made to look like a small house. The most popular styles sported low hip roofs (Fig. 1). Most stations contained small offices, one or two small storage rooms, and public restrooms (Fig. 4). Entrance to a men's room was usually inside the station house as a convenience to employees as well as customers. Entrance to a women's room was usually discretely hidden behind or along side the building. Handcranked oil dispensers were located at the center of the office opposite the front door; a desk, chairs, and a stove completed the basic furnishings (Fig. 4).

Many of these buildings were prefabricated. An oil company could select one of several standardized buildings listed in a manufacturer's catalogue, or a custom designed prefabricated building could be developed for the company's exclusive use. Manufacturers of prefabricated buildings pointed to various cost

savings. Buildings were of structural steel construction; sections could be easily bolted together saving labor costs. A prefabricated building could be salvaged and reassembled at another site should an initial location prove

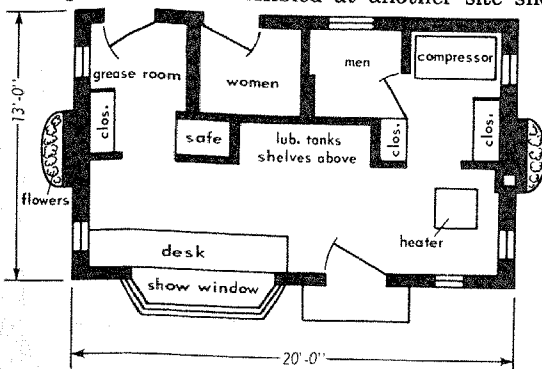


FIGURE 4—Diagram of a "House" station. The "English Cottage" style was adopted by the Pure Oil Co. Source: Ward K. Halbert, "Merchandise Display Window Features Pure Oil Co.'s New Stations," *National Petroleum News*, Vol. 19 (Aug. 17, 1927), p. 22.

unprofitable. Prefabs were faced in brick, stucco, zinc or heavy galvanized steel: surfaces which were easy to clean and maintain. Tile (either clay or metal), copper, zinc, or galvanized steel was used for roofing. In 1923 the Arthur B. Sheppard Co. advertised its "Type-G" station as sixteen feet wide, fourteen feet deep, and ten feet high. The building, constructed with a heavy structural steel frame,

white enameled steel siding, metal roof, and plate glass windows set in steel sash, cost about \$2,200.²⁰ Most prefabricators used a variety of architectural adornments to decorate their buildings. The use of pilasters to simulate pillars at the corners of buildings was common. One company offered several classical revival buildings including a station with an entablature in a front facing gable.²¹ The lower cost of prefabricated buildings enabled oil companies to erect more buildings and thus develop larger trade territories. Some companies pursued traditional architectural styles as a means of establishing company identities. In New England the Jenney Manufacturing Co. of Boston sought to "blend its stations into the regional landscape."²² The company developed a "cottage" with stepped hip roof and cupola, trimmed with shuttered windows and cornice to simulate a federal-styled house. Unfortunately, the result was termed "colonial architecture," an early instance of Georgian, Federal, and Classical Revival styles being confused under the "colonial" rubric. The Beacon Refining Co. of Everett, Massachusetts was so successful with its "colonial" stations that the company ultimately changed its name to the Colonial Beacon Oil Co.²³ The Pure Oil Co. adopted an "English Cottage" style.²⁴ The steep, end-gabled roof was of blue tile and the walls were of white stucco placed either on hollow tile or on wood lathe. Presumably, the use of tall end chimneys and front bay windows with flower boxes made these buildings distinctly English (Fig. 5).

The House With Canopy

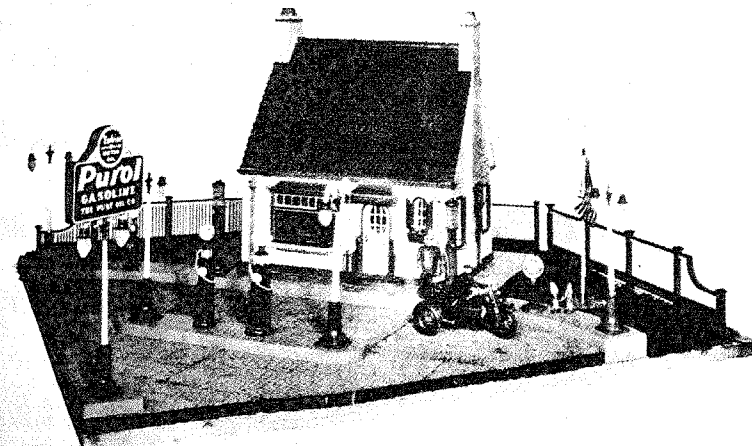
The addition of a canopy to the small house or cottage produced another distinctive type of gasoline station (Figs. 1, 6, and 7).²⁵ Standard Oil of Ohio

pioneered a prefabricated prototype in 1916 (Fig. 8).²⁶ The station building was fifteen feet square and the canopy, supported in front by a single post, covered a similar area. In 1918 the Gulf Refining Co. adopted a brick and tile roof station with canopy supported by four brick columns covering two front driveways.²⁷ Standard Oil of New York added canopies to its "colonial" stations in 1923 which carried iron balustrades to simulate porches.²⁸ The use of tile for roofing and stucco for wall facings invited use of Spanish architectural styles. The Ventura Refining Co. in Los Angeles adopted "mission type" buildings in the 1920s.²⁹ Each station was faced with stucco to give the appearance of adobe and had a flat roof with a prominent belfry (the mission bell being the company's trade mark). Gasoline pumps were hidden inside the pillars supporting the canopy. In 1917 the Texas Company (Texaco) introduced its own "old mission style" station constructed of hollow tile and brick walls with stucco finish, a red tile roof, and double arched covered driveways.³⁰

The House With Bays

By 1925 most gasoline stations were equipped with grease pits and car washing floors. As car washing required a solid, well drained surface, concrete aprons were built. Grease pits, open trenches with walls of poured concrete or masonry, were usually located immediately beside a station house. Cars were elevated slightly above a pit on ramps which straddled the trench. The term "grease monkey" applied to the mechanic who worked below. After 1925 rotary lifts operated by air compressors gradually replaced the grease pits. Where winter weather interfered with outdoor car maintenance, prefabricated steel

A Model of a Model Station



COMPLETE MODEL OF A PURE OIL SERVICE STATION STANDS IN THE RECEPTION ROOM AT THE CHICAGO OFFICE. FIGURE 5—Model of Pure Oil's "English Cottage" station. Source: *Pure Oil News*, Vol. 11 (June, 1921), p. 21.

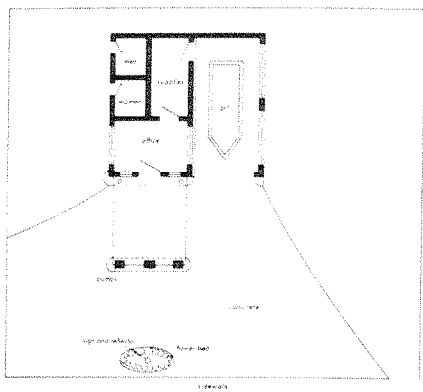


FIGURE 6—Diagram of a "House With Canopy" station. Source: "1931 Trends In Station Design," *National Petroleum News*, Vol. 23 (March 4, 1931), p. 93.

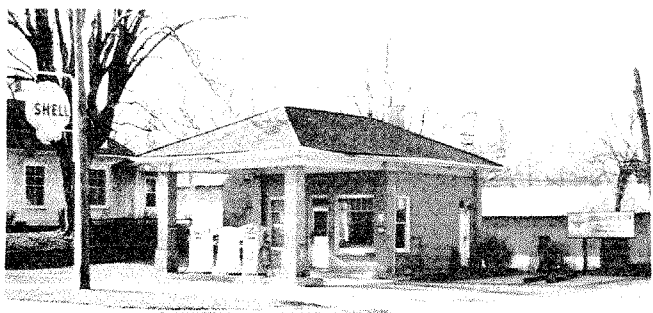


FIGURE 7—A "House With Canopy" station on old U.S. 66 at Greenup, Illinois.

FIGURE 8—A prefabricated "House With Canopy" station on old U.S. 66 at Wilmington, Illinois. This and similar buildings were used extensively by Standard Oil of Ohio and Standard Oil of Kentucky among other companies.



FIGURE 9—A "House With Bay" station.

and glass washing parlors and lubritoriums appeared.³¹ More common, however, was the addition of one or more covered bays to existing station houses or the construction of new stations with two or more bays covering the washing and lubricating floors (Figs. 1 and 9).³² Before 1935, building additions usually adopted the architecture of the original structure. For example, the Pure Oil Co. carried the steep gabled roofs of its "English Cottage" stations across appended service bays. After 1935, additions were usually simplified, flat roofed boxes. The very large gasoline stations with three or more bays (sometimes in separate buildings) were usually called "super service stations." These facilities advertised "one-stop" automotive service. Besides washing and lubricating, engine, brake, and other repair services were usually available.

The Oblong Box

The economic depression of the 1930s brought many changes to gasoline station design. To counter deteriorating gasoline sales, many companies expanded auxilliary product lines requiring larger display rooms and larger storage spaces. The sale of tires, batteries, and accessories (the so called "TBA" line) was universally adopted. At the same time, companies began to emphasize automobile repair which required more and larger bays. In addition, the Depression encouraged many companies to expand territorially. Construction of new stations in new areas did not divert customers from a company's established outlets, but could attract trade from one's competitors. To develop these new territories, the oil companies built stations that were distinctly different.

Hip and gable roofs were replaced by flat roofs. Offices were enlarged and integrated with the service bays. The whole was integrated as an "oblong box"

with rectangular perimeter dimensions (Figs. 1 and 10). The amount of plate glass was increased with a corresponding reduction in exterior decoration. Walls of stucco or brick were painted using colors appropriate to a company's signage. Terra Cotta was a popular facing material in the 1930s while porcelain enamel predominated in the 1940s and 1950s. This new gasoline station design followed closely the edicts of the new "International Style" of architecture championed by the Bauhaus School in Germany (Fig. 11). Marketing engineers (as most companies called their architect-designers) took pride in introducing "streamlined," modern stations. "Modern architecture," however, was certainly a misnomer. More correctly, they had introduced "depression architecture," a stripped down, functional design which clearly reflected hard economic times.

Many oil companies modified the "oblong box" in order to achieve customer recognition. The roof of the office section might be constructed slightly higher than the bays (Mid-Continent D-X stations in the 1930s), or, then again, it might be lower (Atlantic stations in the 1960s). One corner of the office might be curved to contain the front door (Standard of Indiana in the 1940s). An office facade might be extended forward (Texaco in the 1940s) or recessed relative to the bays (Sinclair in the early 1940s). Some companies, like Standard of California, retained the canopy as a form of trade mark. Other companies, like Shell in the 1950s, adopted towers or pylons. Reintroduction of the "colonial" style brought flat gable and multiple gable roofs with cupolas (Atlantic stations in the 1960s). Despite these modifications, however, the prime characteristic of the "oblong box" was its distinctive shape based on a rectangular floor plan and rectangular silhouette.

The Mid-Continent Petroleum Corporation appears to have been the first to adopt the "oblong box" as a standardized design.³³ The first station was opened at Sapulpa, Oklahoma in 1931 at a cost of \$11,000. The exterior of the building featured large expanses of plate glass set in unpainted aluminum window and door frames. The walls were covered with black vitrolite which gave the appearance of highly polished glass. Before 1950 most oblong boxes were prefabricated.³⁴ Steel I-beam frames were shop assembled in sections and then bolted together at a construction site. Structures were usually covered with porcelain enamel sheets and plate glass.³⁵ In 1958 the Shell Oil Company's prefabricated "S20B" stations ranged in price from \$19,000 to \$22,000 (Fig. 12).³⁶ After 1950 cinder and concrete block construction replaced prefabricated steel and by 1960 acrylic-vinyl and translucent plexiglas (including sheets backed by fluorescent tubes for night lighting) had become popular.³⁷ After 1960 plastic was used to simulate other building materials such as wood, stone, and brick.³⁸

In the 1920s the oil companies had worked to soften the intrusion of the gasoline station in the American landscape, but in the 1930s they sought to maximize gasoline station visibility. The new "oblong boxes" contrasted sharply with their surroundings, the better to attract attention.³⁹ The use of porcelain enamel invited adoption of vivid colors. The glistening porcelain and

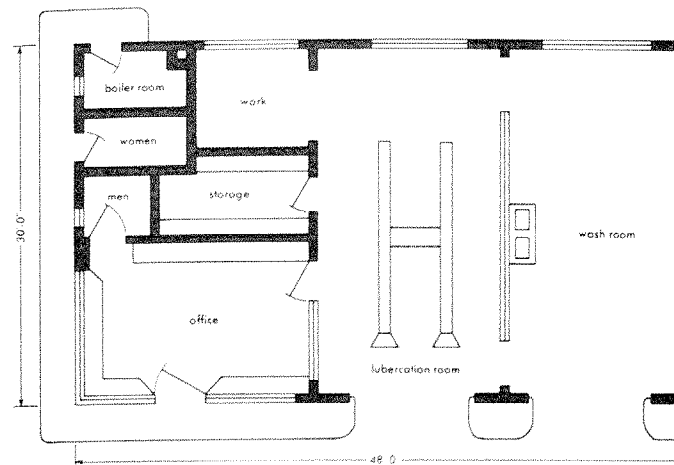


FIGURE 10—Diagram of a typical "Oblong Box" station.

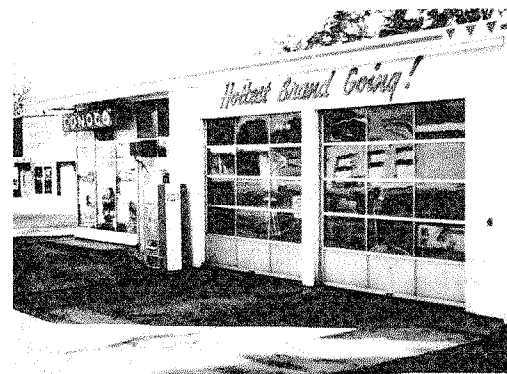


FIGURE 11—An "Oblong Box" station. The simple lines of the box and the extensive use of glass on the steel frame follow closely the edicts of "modern architecture" as practiced in Germany in the 1930s.



FIGURE 12—The Shell Oil Company's "S20B" station, an early example of a modified "Oblong Box."

glass facades were more easily lit at night offering a potential "twenty-four hour sales appeal."⁴⁰ The new "oblong boxes" enjoyed other advantages. Prefabricated buildings could be erected quickly and they could be salvaged should a station prove unprofitable on a given site. They could be easily maintained for the new facade materials did not require constant painting. "Oblong boxes" were larger and contained little wasted space. The large expanses of glass facilitated selling through point of purchase display. The new stations were "bigger, better, and brighter."

By 1960 the gaudy porcelain and plastic oblongs had met with sufficient disfavor from planning and zoning commissions and had suffered sufficient criticism from the public at large that several oil companies began to explore design modifications to "blend" gasoline stations into new suburban landscapes. Shell introduced the "ranch-style" in 1960 at Millbrae, California. The *National Petroleum News* praised the station: "It very definitely does not gloss, glitter, or glare. The so-called 'ice box' look is out. While most of the designs still use a basic metal building, they musn't look like metal. Rustic features like cedar shakes, used brick, roof overhang, and darker colors are common."⁴² By 1966 Shell had 3,500 of the new stations in operation (Fig. 13.)⁴³ The average cost for a totally new building was \$65,000.⁴⁴ Older "oblongs" could be easily adapted to the new style by replacing the porcelain enamel and other wall facings, by adding a flat, front gable roof, and by extending the eave on one end of the building to form a porch (usually to shelter vending machines and protect the entrances to the rest rooms). The "ranch style" was essentially the old "oblong" without its glitter and without its flat roof, modernized through "facelifting" and "top hatting."⁴⁵ The new stations were called "blend-ins."

By 1970 several companies had developed distinctive styles. Texaco introduced the mansard roof in 1964 on a new station built at Matawan, New Jersey.⁴⁶ The station featured hexagonal roof sections (that repeated the shape of Texaco's new signs) and side-entry bays with the front of the building finished with stone (plastic, simulating stone, was used in later buildings). The American Oil Co. (Standard of Indiana) and Sunoco "colonialized" their stations in the Northeast by adding rafters to the old flat roofs to form hip roofs, by adding cupolas, by reducing the size of the window areas, and by resurfacing buildings with used red brick (Fig. 14).⁴⁷

The Small Box

The rise of the new "independents" (the localized jobbers and regional distributing companies), led to the development of a new station type: the "small box." Most independent stations sold only gasoline and oil along with sundry lines of merchandise such as cigarettes and soft drinks. The independents tended to shun the premiums, credit cards, and other promotional gimmicks used by the major oil companies and to emphasize lower gasoline prices. "Bulk stations" early typified the independent retailers: the above ground storage



FIGURE 13— The results of "face-lifting" and "top-hatting": an "Oblong Box" modified in the "ranch style."



FIGURE 14— An "Oblong Box" which has been "colonialized."

tanks dominating station grounds and symbolizing the lower retail prices of wholesale jobbing.⁴⁸ This form of gasoline sales imposed few building requirements. Stations needed only small offices, storage rooms, and restrooms (Fig. 15). Small prefabricated, glass and enamel plated structures served quite adequately (Fig. 1).⁴⁹ Large billboards lining the driveways were also common.

The Small Box With Canopy

Canopies had gone out of style in the Northeast and the Middle West with the adoption of the oblong box. Severe winter weather added to canopy upkeep and canopies interfered with nighttime lighting. Covered drives were thought to be confining. Inexperienced drivers (particularly women, according to one survey) tended to shun canopied stations.⁵⁰ Only along the Pacific Coast, in the Southwest, and in the Southeast did the canopy survive, popular as a shade against the sun. Many national companies (such as Texaco and Sinclair) built canopied stations in those areas to compete with the regional companies (such as Standard of California in the Far West).⁵¹ After 1960 the canopy was adopted widely by the independents, not so much for the protection it afforded customers and attendants, but as an advertising gimmick. Canopies carried large signs and made the small glass boxes seem more pretentious. Several canopy styles became popular. The "butterfly" canopy was attached to the station building and swept upward and out over the drive and the pumps (Fig. 1). The standard canopy was self standing: that is, it was not connected to the station building. Most canopies tended to measure around thirty by forty feet, equal to covering two driveways and a single pump island.

The Canopy and Booth

By 1970 many new stations appeared which were little more than canopies.⁵² Station offices were reduced to small booths located on one of the pump islands (Figs. 1 and 16). Booths housed the attendant, his cash register, and little else. Restrooms and vending machines were housed in separate shed-like buildings located at one edge of the driveway. Canopies and buildings were prefabricated with canopies large enough to cover four or more driveways. These stations, a return by the major companies to the "filling station" idea, were a direct result of higher gasoline prices in an era of gasoline shortages.⁵³ The American motorist was more aware of price to the potential advantage of the independent retailers who had always sought to keep prices low. The major oil companies established "independents" of their own. Called "concubine companies," these subsidiaries have their own brand names, most of which emphasize value and economy.⁵⁴ Since 1970, price competition has replaced territorial competition in the quest for the motorist's gasoline dollar.

The Popularity of Station Types by Period

Volumes of the *National Petroleum News* published at decade intervals were analyzed to determine the relative popularity of the various gasoline sta-

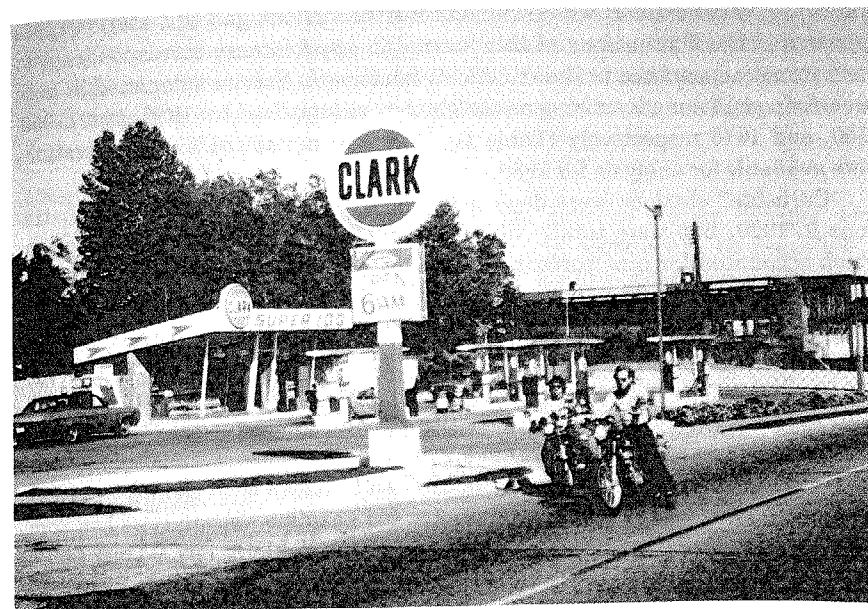


FIGURE 15— A "Small Box" station.



FIGURE 16— A "Canopy and Booth" station viewed from beneath the canopy.

tion types by period.⁵⁶ It was assumed that the various gasoline station types appeared in the illustrations of this journal in approximate correspondence to their actual appearance in the American landscape. Stations depicted in both advertising and nonadvertising materials were categorized for 1920, 1940, 1950, 1960, and 1970 respectively (Table I). Only the nonadvertising illustrations were available for analysis for 1930.

"Curbside" stations were depicted in over one-third of the total illustrations in 1920, but were totally absent thereafter. The "shed type" station, which accounted for nine percent of the illustrations in 1920, had practically disappeared by 1940. The "house," which also accounted for nine percent of the total in 1920, maintained a small popularity through 1940 with a residual appearance thereafter. After the "curbside" station, the "house with canopy" was the first significant new station type to appear. Accounting for nearly one-third of the total illustrations in 1920, its popularity decreased steadily after 1930. The "house with bays" station appears to have been a transitory type of the 1930s involving enlargement of "house" and "house with canopy" stations to handle T.B.A. and light repair functions. No gasoline station type has dominated as completely nor for as long a period as the "oblong box." Over half of the stations illustrated in 1940 and 1950 were of this type, and nearly two-thirds in 1960 and 1970. The "small box" reached its peak of popularity in 1950 declining thereafter. The "small box with canopy," on the other hand, appears

TABLE I
The Changing Popularity of Gasoline Station Types
by Decade Intervals, 1920 to 1970

Type	Percent of Stations					
	1920	1930*	1940	1950	1960	1970
Curbside	37	0	0	0	0	0
Shed	9	0	1	1	0	0
House	9	8	8	2	1	1
House with canopy	31	29	8	2	1	0
House with bays	1	12	6	2	0	0
Oblong box	0	3	54	57	63	62
Small box	1	0	4	19	9	1
Small box with Canopy	0	0	0	1	8	12
Canopy and booth	0	0	0	0	1	8
Other designs	12	46	19	16	17	16

Source: Author's content analysis of Volumes 12, 22, 32, 42, 52 and 62 of the *National Petroleum News*.

*Illustrations in advertisements were not analyzed. The author was unable to obtain complete copies of Volume 22. Advertising was commonly omitted from bound periodicals during the 1930s.

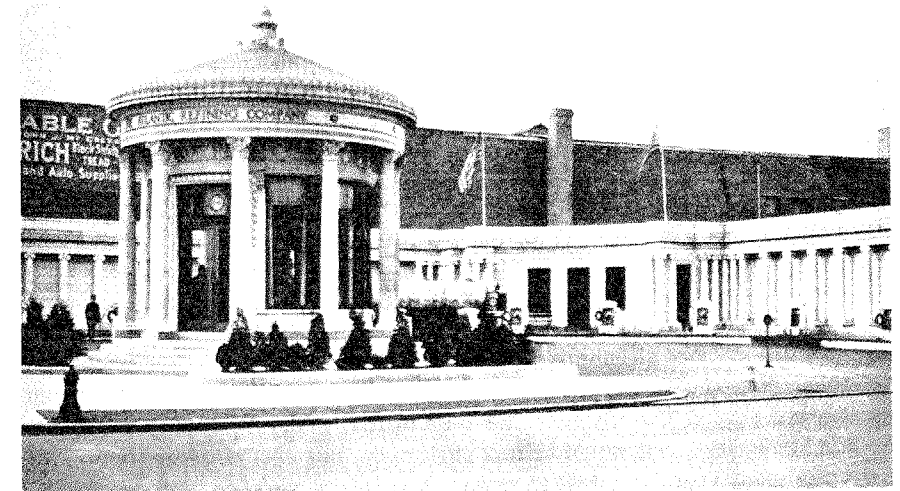
to have grown in popularity in direct proportion to the latter's decline. Only a trace of the "canopy and booth" type was evident in the illustrations of 1960, but eight percent were so classified in 1970. Canopies, combined with either the small glass box or the attendant's booth, were evident in one-fifth of the total illustrations in 1970.

Unique Designs

The late 1920s was the period for unique gasoline station designs. Only fifty-four percent of the stations illustrated in 1930 could be classified as opposed to an average of eighty-five percent for the other years. Filling stations were constructed to simulate windmills, pyramids, pagodas, castles, mosques, wigwams, and a host of other romantic landscape features.⁵⁶ One gasoline station in Lancaster, Pennsylvania was constructed in the form of a giant gasoline pump.⁵⁷ One type of novelty station, a lighthouse, was prefabricated.⁵⁸ Perhaps, the most elaborate gasoline station ever constructed was built by the Atlantic Refining Co. in Philadelphia in 1918. The central building and the extensive colonades which surrounded the large driveway were faced in white terra cotta tile. The entire complex was styled after a classical Greek Temple (Fig. 17).⁵⁹ Few novelty stations were replicated in great numbers. Most of the unusual stations were experimental: costly experiments which did not produce the substantially higher sales which their developers anticipated.

Color Schemes and Logos

Each oil company sought to establish clear recognition among motorists by



GASOLINE FILLING STATION
FORTHETH AND WALNUT STREETS, PHILADELPHIA, PA.
W. G. Wilkins Co., Architects

FIGURE 17—The Atlantic Refining Company's "Greek Temple" in Philadelphia. Source: *Architectural Terra Cotta Brochure Series, Vol. 5, The Garage* (New York: National Terra Cotta Society, 1915).

employing uniform color schemes and logos for their stations. Trademarks were protected by federal legislation and in the early 1930s various state courts held that companies could also claim exclusive rights to color schemes and decorative motifs, especially when they were combined with clearly recognized logos.⁶⁰ Red, white, and blue was adopted by most of the companies descended from the Standard Oil Trust. The red, white, and green of the American Oil Co. and the Pan-American Petroleum and Transport Co. and the red and white of the Continental Oil Co. (Conoco) were exceptions.⁶¹ Shell Oil adopted red and yellow. Sun Oil adopted blue and yellow. Many companies have changed their color schemes. The Cities Services (Citgo) has been associated with black and white, green and white, and red, white, and maroon successively. Some colors and logos are integrally linked. Gulf Oil Corporation's orange disc was adopted in 1903. Entering the New Orleans kerosene market, the company found that grocers identified the oil companies by the colors of their delivery wagons. Orange was one of the few colors not in use and thus available to the company.⁶²

The company sign, elevated on a pole, is an integral part of nearly every gasoline station. Company emblems reflect gasoline marketing history. The various Standard Oil companies have jealously protected exclusive use of both the "Standard Oil" name (or its obvious derivatives) in their original marketing territories. Standard of Indiana added the insignia of the oval and the torch in the 1940s. Standard of New Jersey adopted the oval and the word "Esso" (which stood for S.O. or Standard Oil) in 1923. In the 1970s this well known brand name was replaced by "Exxon" in an attempt by the company to unify its marketing operations under a single name both within and beyond its original territory. Standard of New Jersey had marketed under "Dixie," "Humble," "Carter," "Pate," "Oklahoma," and "Enco" among other brand names. The Shell Oil Co. clings to the shell logo derived from Royal-Dutch Petroleum's (the parent company) origin as a London importer of seashells from Indonesia. The Texaco star reflects the company's origin in Texas.

Conclusions

Architecture in any society is a constantly changing, fluid thing. This is especially true of commercial architecture where buildings are part of continuing advertising campaigns to establish marketing territories. This is clearly seen in the case of American gasoline distribution. Stations have had to look like gasoline stations although each company has tried to make its stations distinctive. Nonetheless, deviations could not depart substantially from established norms. The challenge has been to find that rare quality of "difference in similarity" that would attract customers, but also reassure them. This need prompted a constant drift to new color schemes, signage, and decoration, but always within a narrow range of building types in any one time period. On the other hand, major changes in marketing strategy have always prompted the development of new station prototypes. The "house with canopy" prevailed until the expansion of "T.B.A." retailing and the introduction of automobile

repair encouraged rapid adoption of the "oblong box" during the Depression. "Oblong boxes" prevailed until the recent period of high gasoline prices. Today the canopy dominates, but in new forms reminiscent of the early filling stations.

In the early years the oil companies used traditional building and architectural ideas. "House," "house and canopy," and "house and bay" stations retained the scale and adopted the materials and styles of American domestic architecture. When gasoline retailing was in its infancy, the oil companies tread carefully in introducing the gasoline station to the American roadside. Gasoline stations were designed to blend into their surroundings. With the automobile permanently entrenched in the American life-style, the industry more recklessly impacted the American scene. Faced with a slow growth market after 1930, the oil companies evolved the "oblong box" as a truly distinctive form of architecture. "Oblong boxes," especially those covered with porcelain enamel, stood apart from surrounding features to disrupt and, in many instances, to blight the landscape. Today, a more mature industry has begun to recognize its responsibility for quality landscape design although many new stations still create an obnoxious presence. If the evolution of gasoline stations is typical of other forms of commercial architecture in the United States, significant changes in building types can be expected when industry-wide dislocations in supply, demand, and related price of product occur.

Unlike building types associated with folk architectural traditions, gasoline stations did not spread across the landscape diffused from clearly defined culture hearths. Prototypes were developed through experimentation in many places and then adopted almost universally across the country aided by such mechanisms of communication as industry trade journals. The *National Petroleum News* was the leading journal serving the American petroleum industry and, as such, played a leading role in encouraging gasoline station improvement through annual design contests and the weekly and later monthly reporting of design innovations and individual company adoptions. It seems imperative that the study of twentieth century commercial architecture include content analyses of appropriate trade journals. Journal illustrations (both of an advertising and nonadvertising nature) as well as descriptive textual materials offer a resource little tapped by geographers and architectural historians interested in the evolution of commercial building types.

Why geographers and other scholars would want to research gasoline stations and other commercial buildings of the American roadside may not be very obvious, especially to those who suffer a well developed sense of "good taste" in landscape. Like it or not, vernacular commercial architecture has been as much a part of the American experience as any other monumental, vernacular, or folk architectural expression. Like other aspects of landscape, the roadside is a transitory thing. Its various forms and its various elements, whether of good, bad, or indifferent taste, ought to be recorded and understood as a part of our changing American culture. Also pressing are the immediate concerns of preservation. Hopefully, good examples of roadside architecture from the early

part of this century will be preserved for future generations. Questions need to be answered. What was typical in the landscape in different places at different times? What was atypical? What should be valued? What should be preserved? I hope that the oil companies will promote selected retention of older gasoline stations typical of past periods, and that local communities will encourage such preservation in order to insure greater diversity and interest in the American landscape.

Notes

¹The literature on gasoline station location is summarized in R. James Claus and Walter G. Hardwick, *The Mobile Consumer, Automobile-Oriented Retailing and Site Selection* (Don Mills, Ontario: Collier-MacMillan Canada Ltd.). See also: R. James Claus, *Spatial Dynamics of Gasoline Service Stations* (Vancouver, B.C.: Tantalus Research Limited, B.C. Geographical Series Number 10, 1969). The literature on gasoline station design appears mainly in the trade journals of the American petroleum industry. See especially the *National Petroleum News* (hereafter footnoted as *NPN*).

²"Now the No-Service Station," *Time*, Vol. 110, No. 8 (August 22, 1977), p. 43.

³*U.S. Census of Business*.

⁴The companies created out of the Standard Oil Trust (their present day successors shown in parentheses) include: Standard Oil of New Jersey (Exxon), Standard Oil of New York (Mobil), Atlantic Refining Co. (Arco), Standard Oil of Ohio (Sohio), the Ohio Oil Co. (Marathon), Standard Oil of Indiana, Continental Oil Co., and Standard Oil of California. Subsidiaries which enabled the original companies to market beyond their legal territories included: American Oil Co., Pan American Petroleum and Transport Co., and Utah Oil Refining Co. (Standard of Indiana); Humble Refining Co., Standard of Pennsylvania, and Standard of Louisiana (Exxon), General Petroleum Corp., Magnolia Petroleum Co., Vacuum Oil Co., and White Star Oil Co. (Mobil); Standard of Kentucky and the California Co. (Standard of California); and the Mutual Oil Co. (Continental).

⁵Frank Breese, "How to Stay Youthful at Fifty: the NPN Story," *NPN*, Vol. 51 (Feb. 1959), p. 96.

⁶The term "independent" initially applied to oil companies independent of Standard Oil. The largest of these independents in 1910 included (successor companies in parentheses): American Gasoline Co. (Shell), Gulf Refining Co., Pure Oil Co. (Union), Texas Co. (Texaco), Tidewater Oil Co. (Getty), and Union Oil Co. of California. The list of large independents after 1920 included in addition: Cities Service Corp., Mid-Continent Oil Co. (Sun), Phillips Petroleum Co., Sinclair Refining Co. (Arco), Skelly Oil Co. (Getty), and Sun Oil Co. Today the term "independent" refers to small oil companies engaged only in refining and/or distribution. "Major" oil companies, on the other hand, also engage in crude oil production and exploration.

⁷"1911-1919: The Growth of Competition," *NPN*, Vol. 61 (Feb. 1969), p. 114.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 115.

¹⁰"Around the Filling Stations," *NPN*, Vol. 14 (March 1, 1922), p. 8.

¹¹Breese, *op. cit.* [see footnote 5 above], p. 99.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 198.

¹³"1911-1919: The Growth of Competition," *op. cit.* [see footnote 7 above], p. 115.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 116.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶Breese, *op. cit.* [see footnote 5 above], p. 90.

¹⁷Paul Truesdell, "Highest New York State Court Rules Out Curb Pumps in Buffalo," *NPN*, Vol. 15 (June 20, 1925), p. 21.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹The early "blind" gasoline pumps did little more than drain underground tanks by siphon whereas the hand-operated "visible" pumps with glass containers on top enabled the operator to

preset the amount of gasoline drained into an automobile tank. Electrically driven pumps and pumps with "clock-face" metering systems were innovations of the 1920s and 1930s, respectively.

²⁰Advertisement of the Arthur B. Sheppard Co., *NPN*, Vol. 15 (Oct. 31, 1923), p. 94.

²¹*Ibid.*

²²Roger B. Stafford, "Jenny Builds Stations to Fit New England Settings," *NPN*, Vol. 19 (May 4, 1927), p. 27.

²³V.B. Guthrie, "Bostonian Can Purchase His Gasoline and Not Offend Aesthetic Sense," *NPN*, Vol. 15 (July 25, 1923), p. 34.

²⁴Ward K. Halbert, "Merchandise Display Window Features Pure Oil Co.'s New Stations," *NPN*, Vol. 19 (August 17, 1927), p. 22.

²⁵The terms "overhang," "covered drive," and "driveway shed" were also used to describe canopies.

²⁶"Here's Standard's Model for Steel Service Stations," *NPN*, Vol. 8 (June 1916), p. 42. The most frequent advertisers of prefabricated "house and canopy" stations in the *NPN* were: Blaw-Knox Co. (Pittsburgh, PA.), Butler Manufacturing Co. (Kansas City, Mo.), J.R. Doelker Co. (Columbus, Ohio), Edwards Manufacturing Co. (Cincinnati, Ohio), Marion Machine Foundry and Supply Co. (Marion, Ind.), Metal Shelter Co. (St. Paul, Minn.), J.E. Moss Iron Works (Wheeling, W.Va.), W.F. Norman Sheet Metal Manufacturing Co. (Newark, N.J.), and Ohio Body and Blower Co. (Cleveland, Ohio).

²⁷"Standard Type of Service Station," *NPN*, Vol. 10 (Nov. 9, 1918), p. 40.

²⁸"Station Type Adopted By N.Y. Standard," *NPN*, Vol. 15 (July 18, 1923), p. 41.

²⁹"Pattern Stations on Old Missions," *NPN*, Vol. 7 (Nov. 1915), p. 50.

³⁰"Stucco, Tile Lend to Pleasing Station Architecture," *NPN*, Vol. 9 (Feb. 1917), p. 66.

³¹"Greasing Equipment Takes to Cover in Modern Super Service Station," *NPN*, Vol. 22 (March 19, 1930), p. 103. The Edwards Manufacturing Co. of Cincinnati was the most frequent advertiser of lubricatoriums in the *NPN*.

³²The term "stall" was also used to describe enclosed bays.

³³"Mid-Continent Builds Ultra-Modern Station," *NPN*, Vol. 23 (August 12, 1931), p. 65.

³⁴The most frequent advertisers of prefabricated "oblong box" gasoline stations were: The Austin Co. (Cleveland, Ohio), B. and M. Corp. (Columbus, Ohio), Butler Manufacturing Co. (Kansas City, Mo.), Cincinnati Manufacturing Co. (Cincinnati, Ohio), Columbian Steel Tank Co. (Kansas City, Mo.), Dresser Engineering Co. (Tulsa, Okla.), Erie Meter Systems Inc. (Erie, Pa.), Functional Buildings Inc. (Cleveland, Ohio), Madison Inc. (Conyers, Ga.), W. A. Park, Inc. (Angola, Ind.), Steco Steel Co. (Michigan City, Ind.), and Truscon Steel Co. (Youngstown, Ohio).

³⁵Porcelain enamel was made from a soft sheet of steel, called "enameling stock," covered with a layer of "frit" (minute particles of shattered glass resulting from the contact of molten glass with cold water). The frit-covered steel was then placed in fusing ovens at high temperatures.

³⁶"Shell Tailors Stations to Fit," *NPN*, Vol. 50 (Jan. 1958), p. 106.

³⁷"Plastic Provides a Built-in Spectacular," *NPN*, Vol. 49 (March 1957), p. 101 and "Now its Plastic for Prefab Stations," *NPN*, Vol. 52 (March 1960), p. 132.

³⁸"Not All Masonry is Masonry," *NPN*, Vol. 60 (April 1968), p. 124.

³⁹E.L. Barringer, "Better Materials and Fittings Make Stations More Attractive," *NPN*, Vol. 24 (May 4, 1932), p. 47.

⁴⁰John W. Thompson, "Uniformity is Trend in Station Design," *NPN*, Vol. 29 (April 21, 1937), p. 59.

⁴¹Frank C. Sturtevant, "Marketers Design Stations to Reduce Building Costs," *NPN*, Vol. 41 (April 13, 1949), p. 29.

⁴²"Shell Oil's Newest 'Blend-in'," *NPN*, Vol. 52 (Feb. 1960), p. 121 and "How Ranch Style is Taking Over Service Station Design," *NPN*, Vol. 58 (May 1966), p. 98.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁴⁵"How Old Stations Get the New Look," *NPN*, Vol. 59 (Oct. 1967), p. 77.

⁴⁶"Are These Stations What's Ahead for Texaco?" *NPN*, Vol. 58 (Feb. 1966), p. 98.

⁴⁷"East Coast: From Box to Colonial," *NPN*, Vol. 61 (June 1969), p. 37.

⁴⁸"Bulk Stations Started in Buffalo, Thrive There Now," *NPN*, Vol. 19 (Oct. 26, 1927), p. 125.

⁴⁹The most frequent advertisers of the prefabricated "small box" were: Avoncraft Division of

Marine Ways Inc. (New Orleans, La.), Porcelain Buildings Inc. (Metairie, La.), Trans-View Structures Inc. (Lake George, N.Y.), and Valentine Manufacturing Inc. (Wichita, Kan.).

⁵⁰Paul Truesdell, "How Re-designing of a Filling Station Doubled its Business," *NPN*, Vol. 15 (June 27, 1923), p. 25.

⁵¹"Canopies: What's Behind an Old Standby's New Appeal," *NPN*, Vol. 50 (Nov. 1958), p. 99.

⁵²"Now, The No-service Station," *op. cit.* [see footnote 2 above].

⁵³"Around the Filling Stations," *op. cit.* [see footnote 10 above].

⁵⁴For example, the Mobil Corp. has introduced "Big Bi" and "Hi Val" gasolines in selected areas.

⁵⁵The number of illustrations varied from year to year: 140 in 1920, 89 in 1930 (nonadvertising materials only), 142 in 1940, 118 in 1950, 193 in 1960, and 91 in 1970. The mix of advertising and nonadvertising illustrations depicting gasoline stations also varied: 86 percent were advertisements in 1920, forty-seven percent in 1940, thirty-four percent in 1950, sixty-eight percent in 1960, and thirty-six percent in 1970. Throughout the *NPN*'s history, innovations in gasoline station design generally appeared first in advertisements. However, most advertising illustrations depicted the typical or common place as opposed to the unique. Illustrations depicting gasoline stations also appeared with articles concerned with gasoline marketing, in general, and gasoline station management, more specifically. An average of three articles each year dealt exclusively with gasoline station design.

⁵⁶For examples see: "Super Station Designed as Mosque," *NPN*, Vol. 20 (April 18, 1928), p. 93; E.L. Barringer, "Tourist Camp Stations Patterned After Dutch Windmills," *NPN*, Vol. 22 (April 30, 1930), p. 105; Louis Weller, "Indian Village to Grow Around Station," *NPN*, Vol. 22 (June 25, 1930), p. 89.

⁵⁷Advertisement, *NPN*, Vol. 46 (Jan.-March 1954), p. 11.

⁵⁸"Portable Country Stations are Replicas of Famous Lighthouses," *NPN*, Vol. 20 (Sept. 26, 1928), p. 68.

⁵⁹"Sell Gasoline From Greek Temple," *NPN*, Vol. 10 (April 17, 1918), p. 18.

⁶⁰"Exclusive Right to Pump Color Scheme Upheld in Court Ruling," *NPN*, Vol. 22 (May 7, 1930), p. 27.

⁶¹The Pan-American Petroleum and Transport Co. (now merged with the American Oil Co. as a subsidiary of Standard of Indiana) was originally a division of the Mexican Petroleum Corp. marketing Mexican oil and gasoline across the Southeast of the United States.

⁶²"Where Oil Got its Trademarks," *NPN*, Vol. 51 (August 1959), p. 129.

FROM WORK TO PLAY:

Some Observations on a Popular Nostalgic Theme

by Roy C. Buck

