

“Holding the Line Against Philadelphia”: Business, Suburban Change, and the Main Line’s Suburban Square, 1926–1950

Stephanie Dyer*

*Department of History
University of Pennsylvania*

In recent years, business historians have been grumbling about their marginality within the historical profession, issuing rallying cries to integrate business back into the main narratives of history [Galambos, 1992]. Kenneth Lipartito’s well-known directive to situate studies of business within their cultural context [Lipartito, 1995], thus bypassing the structural-functionalism that has long dominated the subfield, is a necessary corrective which should go a long way towards putting business historians on the same page with trends in other subfields of history. Lipartito’s suggestion that business historians study the construction and articulation of meanings negotiated by social actors – of which the firm is just one player – brings business history directly in contact with the consumers, workers, politicians, families, social groups and institutions that populate the general narratives of history. In place of the firm, he posits the study of the market as a site of meaning making as a promising approach for the future of business history.

In addition to being sites of discursive struggles over meaning, markets have a literal material dimension in that they are located in space. Philip Scranton’s recent outline of spatial theory [Scranton, 1996] recounts how economic geographers view space as a variable alongside culture, politics, and economics in the dynamism of social processes – an approach which could prove fruitful to business historians who rarely foreground spatial relations in their work. Among historians, the dialectic of spatiality and social relations has long been a standard trope within urban history, whose case studies focus on the contestation and negotiation over meaning among various actors within a given spatial unit such as city, neighborhood, community, parish, or region. Yet markets are spatial units rarely used within urban history; as a consequence, the role of business actors in shaping urban space has been relatively neglected

* This paper is drawn from a chapter of my dissertation, tentatively titled “Decentering the Consumer City: The Business, Politics and Culture of Retailing and Shopping Center Development in Metropolitan Philadelphia, 1922-1980.” Thanks to Michael Katz, Roger Horowitz and John Smolenski for their comments and advice on this version, and to the Hagley Library for financially supporting this research.

within the field.¹ Taking a cue from Lipartito and Scranton, I believe that market is a category that should be added to this list – a unit of analysis that is crucial for understanding the role of business as agent in the urban environment.

The following is my attempt to write an urban history that puts the spatial construction and meaning of a market at the center of its narrative. I have chosen to follow Sally Clarke's lead in putting intermediaries between business and the broader society at the center of my narrative – those who effectively serve as the cultural translators between the consumers' world and that of the firm [Clarke, 1997]. Within the category of business intermediaries that have had a demonstrable effect on the urban environment, few can compare to shopping centers – businesses which exist in consumer space, whose primary role is to shape and satisfy consumer demand. To a degree that urban historians are only now beginning to appreciate, shopping centers have served as prime vehicles behind the transition to a "post-urban" landscape in the twentieth century United States, the growth of which has been fueled by the continual migration of firms, capital, and labor outward from urban central business districts [Cohen, 1996; Hanchett, 1996; Jackson, 1996]. Thus far, urban historians have recognized shopping centers as part of an abstract economic transformation that shaped the landscape rather than a transformation in cultural and spatial meanings of markets. But as the first large-scale commercial developments in suburban areas, shopping center developers, managers and store personnel were key players in transforming the home/commerce divide that defined the cultural and spatial meaning of suburbia, allowing for an infusion of commerce into suburban areas that created the modern American landscape.

A Shopping Center Grows in Suburbia

Suburban Square, a shopping center located in the Main Line section outside of Philadelphia, serves as an important early example of this cultural and spatial transformation, being one of the first shopping centers in the nation and the first major center located outside the political boundaries of a large city. As described by Robert Fishman [1987], the Main Line at the turn of the century was the model of the "classic railroad suburb," a bedroom community located along the main line of the Pennsylvania Railroad and wholly dependent on Philadelphia's economy for work and consumer goods. For much of the nineteenth century, it had been an area of farms and large country estates for Philadelphia's elite. Beginning in the 1870s, the Pennsylvania Railroad and other developers began rampant land speculation in the area, offering Philadelphia's professional class attractive houses on smaller parcels of land for use as

¹ Outside the excellent work of William Cronon [1991] and a few others, urban historians have given short shrift to the role of business in urban processes, being content to presume a degree of abstraction and unity of meaning, intent, and action among business actors they would never tolerate for institutions, social groups, or other actors. Recent surveys of urban history barely mention business as a concern for the field [Gilfoyle, 1998; Abbott, 1996; Hays, 1993].

their primary residences, which proved popular to those seeking a safe haven from urban commercialism and social diversity. The popularization of the automobile by the early twentieth century extended the reach of suburban development throughout the Main Line's countryside. Population figures for Lower Merion Township, the Main Line's premier township and the area in which Suburban Square was established, illustrate the rapid growth of the Main Line: in 1870, the township's population was 4,886; by 1920, it had increased to 23,866.²

Where Philadelphia's professional class went, the working class followed. The influx of suburbanites into the Main Line required the presence of a labor pool to provide the urban amenities demanded for suburban standards of living: greater employment of construction workers to build homes, servants to staff them, and an ever-growing number of service and goods providers. The dramatic increase of these workers necessitated developing lower-income housing districts in the vicinity for those who could not afford the expensive regional rail commutes from Philadelphia. This housing began clustering near the train station in the South Ardmore section of Lower Merion Township, alongside an increasing number of small businesses such as groceries, laundry, tailoring, and shoe repair shops. By 1922, 26% of new construction in the township went to stores, apartments, and twin homes for these various service providers, and the South Ardmore section began developing a distinctly commercial character and urban levels of population density and traffic congestion.³

Ironically, the material realities of suburban existence demanding urban levels of consumption increasingly came into conflict with suburbanites' long-standing cultural ideas of separating home from commerce. Lower Merion Township suburbanites became increasingly worried about the rapid growth of the South Ardmore commercial district near their affluent neighborhoods. The growing disjunction between their cultural image of suburbia and the commercial growth it spawned galvanized suburbanites to actively try to shape the landscape to meet their image of bucolic residential splendor. In 1919, the Main Line Citizens Association invited city planner Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. to evaluate the necessity of planning in Lower Merion. Olmsted's report raised concerns for the future of the Main Line as a high-class residential district in the wake of continuing commercial growth and recommended zoning and planning for the area as urgently needed.⁴ Lower Merion residents and politicians wasted no time in acting on Olmsted's recommendations; as soon as the State Legislature empowered townships to regulate development, they leaped on the opportunity, enacting building codes in 1919 and creating a zoning commission to draft an ordinance in 1923. Residents discussed the possibility of township planning throughout the 1920s, long before it became legal in 1929 in the state of Pennsylvania.

² U.S. Population Census 1870, 1920.

³ Bureau of Municipal Research, *The Government of Lower Merion Township* (Philadelphia, 1922).

⁴ *Ibid.*

Residents and politicians weren't the only forces actively trying to plan and shape the township's future. In 1926, a real estate syndicate consisting mostly of Main Line businessmen in the fields of real estate, banking, and finance began laying plans for a shopping center near the growing South Ardmore commercial district. They acquired a 7-acre tract, the Dixon estate, just north of the Ardmore train station. They planned a fully diversified collection of shops and services, including a bank, post office, telephone company, food markets, retail stores, a department store, professional offices, and a movie theater – in all, 52 stores in the original plans. While the diversity of shops in the center may seem familiar, other elements were quite different from shopping centers of the postwar period. Unlike the familiar design of a freestanding building with interior malls, this shopping center replicated the layout of a downtown street, complete with an eight-story office building – a veritable skyscraper in the low-lying farmland of Lower Merion Township.⁵ The syndicate planned to construct individual buildings block-by-block, expanding it in phases over a number of years, and approaching individual firms to join the center as building space became available. Unlike the highly visible promotional strategies of the postwar shopping centers, the syndicate made no attempt to identify the development as a discreet commercial center; it lacked a unifying name, conducted no advertising campaigns in either trade or commercial publications, and held no promotional events.

The piecemeal nature of the center's development, in conjunction with a lack of promotional activity from the syndicate, ensured that no one outside the syndicate and the township building inspector knew the extent of their plans.⁶ Nonetheless, the shopping center buildings presumably would have attracted attention because of their location at the entrance to North Ardmore, a neighborhood of affluent estates and large homes bordering on South Ardmore. By the mid-1920s, commercial development in North Ardmore became a hot-button issue when a scattering of stores and gas stations began cropping up along its highways over the objections of area residents.⁷ Since the township's zoning ordinance was not completed until 1927, no legal mechanism existed for curtailing spot commercial growth, of which the shopping center's buildings would seem merely another example. By the time the township zoning maps were finalized, they reflected conditions of boundary mixing in North Ardmore that violated the intended categorical

⁵ Unlike Richard Longstreth [1997, 1997a], who sees Suburban Square as a community-size shopping center, I will argue here that the center was intended to serve as a regional center, though lacking in size by the definitions of shopping center categories developed in the postwar period [Baker & Funaro, 1951].

⁶ Newspaper retrospectives have pointed to major conflicts over the shopping center in the 1920s [*Main Line Times* ca. February 1950, *Philadelphia Inquirer* ca. 1979, Suburban Square clippings file, Historical Society of Lower Merion Township, PA] but I have found no evidence of such a high-profile conflict in local newspapers or public records from the 1920s.

⁷ In a 1926 appeal, PA Superior Court disallowed the use of the existing Township building code to regulate anything beyond building materials and construction, thus necessitating a zoning ordinance to engage in such regulation [*Our Town*, Nov. 27, 1926].

homogeneity of zoning, listing the shopping center property as a commercial zone within a residential zone.

Public Relations, Public Meanings: Managing Cultural Conflict Between Space and Market

It was only when Strawbridge & Clothier [hereafter S&C] announced in 1929 that they would build a branch store in the shopping center that public attention focused on the scale and scope of the development. The S&C branch was the first undertaken by any of Philadelphia's department stores; at 40,000 square feet (less than a quarter of the average anchor store in today's shopping malls) it was one of the largest and most prestigious suburban department stores then in existence. The decision to build the branch wasn't at S&C's initiation, but rather at the behest of the syndicate, which by then had incorporated as the Suburban Company. Although S&C had considered changing locations within center city Philadelphia as early as 1922, the firm never considered moving outside the city nor building branches. Nonetheless, Philadelphia department stores recognized as early as the 1920s that their primary market of affluent Philadelphians were leaving the city for the suburbs, particularly the Main Line [Lief, 1968]. The Suburban Company's offer was a relatively costless experiment in branch store building that gave S&C an outlet in an area with an existing consumer base, provided the land, built the store to suit, and charged only 2.5% of sales in rent.⁸ S&C agreed to join the center, as well as a similar development the Suburban Company was planning in Jenkintown, a suburb north of Philadelphia.

S&C's arrival brought an unprecedented degree of public awareness to the shopping center that had unpredictable results. By the 1920s, department stores had long utilized public relations and had evolved very sophisticated techniques for bringing public attention to their role in local areas. Philadelphia stores were leading innovators in this; John Wanamaker pioneered the art of department store public relations, developing a discourse on department store management as important civic leaders and the stores themselves as centers of community activity that became widespread by the 1920s [Leach, 1993; Fullerton, 1990]. S&C, as Wanamaker's main competitor, developed their own version of the civic discourse, presenting their Quaker founders as honest, public-minded businessmen who worked for the commercial growth and communal betterment of Philadelphia [Lief, 1968]. In their promotions for the Main Line branch, S&C simply transported this civic discourse to the suburban locale, giving no consideration to the cultural meanings suburbanites associated with the suburb/city divide. S&C president Herbert Tily publicly announced that they chose Ardmore "because that section is a rapidly growing one" and the store "would give added impetus to Main Line business," utilizing a discourse of business development as progress that would have been

⁸ Lease between Suburban Company and S&C, Sept. 17, 1929, S&C Papers Box 3.

recognized as a general good for any urban central business district.⁹ A pullout section which ran in local weekly papers foresaw the department store as “the cornerstone in the foundation of the city of the future,” just the beginning of intensified commercial development in Ardmore.¹⁰ Beyond discursive strategies, the dissemination of advertisements for the new store in newspapers throughout greater Philadelphia signaled that S&C saw Ardmore as a commercial center serving not just Lower Merion Township but a market consisting of the entire western suburbs of Philadelphia. One ad showed the department store as the metropole of the Main Line, “accessible to everyone in the Main Line and its adjacent and nearby communities,” and advised elite women that they no longer needed to go downtown to buy quality goods.¹¹ A 1931 institutional ad presented a futuristic vision, showing the downtown S&C store and its Ardmore and Jenkintown branches united in one giant urban center.¹²

Confirming S&C’s metropolitan aspirations, more than 11,000 people from throughout Philadelphia and the suburbs visited the Ardmore store on opening day.¹³ The store proved an instant success; so much so that just two months after its opening S&C decided to expand it by several thousand square feet [Lief, 1968]. Both S&C and the Suburban Company had seriously underestimated the potential demand for a suburban department store among suburban consumers – particularly women – and the extent to which it would displace their trips to Philadelphia. The store’s popularity showed the malleability of the suburban home/commerce divide, as many suburbanites had no problem adapting to using suburban commercial districts requiring shorter commutes from their homes than city shopping. In the wake of S&C’s success, the Suburban Company began efforts to expand their Ardmore center by acquiring more property in North Ardmore. They even began advertising to attract investment, appropriating S&C’s redefinition of Ardmore as the commercial center of the Main Line in a circular to potential investors which claimed that suburbanites “now... stop and shop in Ardmore” rather than go to Philadelphia.¹⁴

This redefinition of Ardmore as a metropolitan commercial center did not unmake the suburban home/commerce divide, but shifted its lines of demarcation to include commercial outposts in suburbia that were acceptable to suburbanites – at a distance. Suburbanites who lived in Ardmore did not acquiesce to this redefinition of their area, but continually fought to maintain and preserve home/commerce boundaries. Concerned that encroaching commercial growth made their residential property increasingly worthless, North Ardmore residents redoubled their efforts to control and shape the landscape through governmental channels. The shopping center’s expansion efforts became their principal target. Hemmed in by the zoning ordinance, the

⁹ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Sept. 22, 1929, S&C Papers Volume 77.

¹⁰ *Ardmore Chronicle*, May 9, 1930, S&C Papers Volume 77.

¹¹ *Society*, May 1930, S&C Papers Volume 77.

¹² *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Oct. 31, 1931, S&C Papers Volume 77.

¹³ *Our Town*, May 16, 1930.

¹⁴ *Integrity Bulletin*, Nov. 1930, S&C Papers Volume 78.

Suburban Company privately recruited neighboring property owners willing to sell their land to petition the Township Board of Commissioners to have their property commercially rezoned. In an early example of what we have come to call NIMBYism, more than 250 “prominent” Ardmore residents protested the appeal, which the Commissioners declined,¹⁵ as they did every subsequent rezoning request on lots neighboring the shopping center throughout the 1930s. In this manner, local residents effectively contained the shopping center to its original property line and protected the values – both cultural and material – of their properties. These neighborhood protests over shopping center zoning directly influenced the 1937 Lower Merion Township Plan, which recommended that the Township cut its existing commercial zoning nearly in half, from 124,800 feet to 64,300 feet.¹⁶

Residents weren't alone in protesting the shopping center's development; they found common cause with the shopowners in South Ardmore's commercial district. Needless to say, local small business owners had different concerns than residents: they were not categorically opposed to commerce in their midst – just to competition from the branches of Philadelphia stores and chain stores. Yet it would be wrong to see the shopkeepers' motivations as material as opposed to the residents' cultural opposition; as recent scholarship has shown, the pervasive anti-chain store ideology of small business during this period did not necessarily reflect the actual political-economic conditions of small business [Monod, 1996; Bean, 1995]. Nor did Ardmore shopkeepers' accusations of chain-store infiltration accurately reflect the composition of the shopping center: while it did include Philadelphia-based branches and chain stores like A&P, it had a diverse mix of businesses including many local businesses. Here again, space was the crucial issue. South Ardmore merchants viewed the North Ardmore shopping center as a competing commercial center rather than an extension of one comprehensive Ardmore commercial district serving a regional market; thus, they disparaged local businesses that closed their shops in South Ardmore in order to open on the North side of the tracks. These merchants actively sought to preserve and enhance South Ardmore as the main shopping district for Lower Merion, even forming their own association to work collectively to better their interests: the Ardmore Retail Merchants Association, with the militant-sounding acronym ARMA. ARMA's promotional activities reveal their conception of South Ardmore as serving a very circumscribed local market. In 1931, ARMA undertook an advertising campaign to increase local awareness of the potentially negative economic impact of the Philadelphia branches and the chain presence, encouraging consumers to patronize local Ardmore business, “where you have your home, where your interests are, where your children go to school, and where everything you value most is centered.”¹⁷

¹⁵ *Main Line Daily Times*, Dec. 12, 1930.

¹⁶ Lower Merion Township Planning Commission, *A Plan for Lower Merion Township* (Lower Merion, 1937).

¹⁷ *Main Line Daily Times*, Sept. 14, 1931.

The Suburban Company did not passively endure criticism of its shopping center, but simultaneously sought to assuage local protest and expand their market through political moves and various public relations strategies. In November 1930, the firm began publishing their own daily newspaper, *The Main Line Daily Times*, edited by former Wanamaker advertising director Gordon Cilley. Under Cilley, the *Times* functioned as a point of entry into the local public discourse around commercial growth through its editorials; moreover, it literally helped to create a common Main Line market by cultivating a readership base from townships and boroughs all along the Main Line for shopping center advertisements. The Suburban Company also entered the fray of local politics when one of its board members, H.T.B. Runk, ran for township commissioner in 1931. Runk's candidacy elicited much criticism from other local newspapers, who saw him as a puppet for the shopping center; but the *Times* dismissed such claims as back-biting.¹⁸ Runk won, guaranteeing the Suburban Company a voice for commercial growth among the commissioners.

Less successful were the Suburban Company's promotional contests and events. Despite being patterned on those utilized by department stores to gain good will within local communities, the shopping center deployed its promotions in a heavy-handed manner that was always explicitly connected to increasing sales and lacked any substantial connection with community symbols or functions. In the most obvious and crass attempt to promote local identification and acceptance, the Suburban Company ran a contest asking local residents to pick a name for the center. Suspiciously, the winning entry hailed from far-off Short Hills, New Jersey; it was "Hestobeen" Square, a bizarre word that combined portions of the names of the firm's three principal developers – hardly household names among Main Liners. The Suburban Company proudly advertised its intention to use the name for a multitude of Hestobeen Squares throughout the Philadelphia metropolitan area.¹⁹ Yet after an initial institutional advertising campaign, all reference to the name was dropped. S&C and other stores in the center failed to use the name in their advertising; nor did the local press use it when reporting on the shopping center. The name choice is an important signifier of the missteps the Suburban Company made in their public relations strategies which, while trying to invoke a community discourse, never acknowledged the perspectives of local residents nor rendered the type of non-remunerative community service functions that made urban department stores such fixtures in their communities and helped to develop their markets.

The failure of the center's promotional strategies to change entrenched local attitudes against the center became apparent when its chartered bank, used by the Suburban Company to finance its real estate projects, collapsed during the national banking crisis. The July 1932 closure devastated the Suburban Company since the shopping center was not generating enough revenue in rental incomes to pay off its mortgages. Unlike current shopping center leases, the Suburban Company store leases had no provisions for

¹⁸ *Main Line Daily Times*, Sept. 16, 1931.

¹⁹ *Main Line Daily Times*, Dec. 15, 1931.

minimum rent, and its percentage rental revenues dropped severely during the Depression. Several Suburban Company officers with outstanding personal loans from the collapsed bank declared bankruptcy and left the firm; one of them went to prison for embezzling from the bank. The shopping center and the Jenkintown center then under construction were placed in receivership of the firms' creditors. Three stores in the shopping center, the entire Jenkintown development, and the *Main Line Daily Times* were sold to pay off bank depositors. Trustees removed the current Suburban Company officers and named the center's architect, Frederick Dreher, as interim manager. The financial collapse and the scandals which rocked the Suburban Company generated much high-profile negative publicity in the local press, inciting one Ardmore weekly to condemn the firm for its irresponsible management and extensive "real estate manipulations."²⁰

The Cultural Work of Public Relations: Redefining the Shopping Center as a Community Space

When its receivership ended in 1936, Dreher became president of the newly reformed Suburban Company and resumed its earlier expansion plans. But Dreher's efforts immediately ran into the same wall of opposition from township commissioners as earlier rezoning attempts.²¹ By the late 1930s, Ardmore residents, small business owners, and politicians had successfully constructed a legal boundary around the center that would prevent it from ever expanding. If the firm was ever going to change this situation, they desperately needed to develop new public relations strategies to help integrate the shopping center into the local landscape of elite residents to the north and shopkeepers to the south. In so doing, the firm revisited earlier efforts to utilize a community discourse, but in a refined manner that incorporated the perspectives of the local community. First, Dreher sought to put a personalized, public face on the shopping center, and so decided to find a name acceptable to the center's merchants and easily identifiable by local residents. In consultation with a local merchant, Dreher settled on the name "Suburban Square," emphasizing identification with the area's suburban geography rather than being an urban center.

Next, Dreher began speaking out on one of the most pressing issues to Ardmore's local merchants: automobile parking. Ardmore's rise as the Main Line's commercial center meant worsening traffic conditions in the South Ardmore business district, and local merchants were desperate for solutions. Dreher became the leading proponent of parking lots as a way to relieve congestion, pointing to Suburban Square's own parking lots as a model to follow. Under his guidance, the Township developed a plan for creating a series of free public parking lots in South Ardmore.²² Dreher's leadership on the parking problem demonstrated to area merchants that he saw the shopping

²⁰ *Main Liner*, July 29, 1932, Dec. 16, 1932.

²¹ *Ardmore Chronicle*, *Main Liner*, Nov. 19, 1937.

²² *Main Line Times*, Jan. 24, 1946.

center and South Ardmore not as competitors, but as part of a unified commercial center serving a rapidly expanding regional market. He began speaking to various business groups in support of creating an association to work for the common interests of Main Line business, and became founding director of the Main Line Chamber of Commerce in 1945. Even ARMA joined the new organization, putting aside its resistant localism.²³ Dreher was a pivotal figure in finally uniting Main Line business around a pro-growth stance during the 1940s that supported the integration of suburban commercial centers like Ardmore into a regional market.

Simultaneously – and contradictorily – Dreher did much to ameliorate residents’ anxieties over the shopping center by publicly coming out in favor of limited growth. In 1940, Bonwit Teller, a leading retail women’s clothing firm with stores in New York and Philadelphia, purchased land across from the Square to build a store. When the specialty store appealed to the Lower Merion Township Board of Commissioners to have the plot commercially rezoned, they were met with the usual petitions, letters, and testimonials from residents and local merchants; in addition, Dreher spoke out against the rezoning. Drawing upon his public role as traffic congestion expert, he testified that because the area already experienced critical levels of automobile use, he could not support another commercial development in the vicinity.²⁴ Dreher was not a disinterested speaker; he himself had offered to build Bonwit Teller a store in the shopping center in 1938, only to be turned down.²⁵ Nonetheless, the move publicly demonstrated the Suburban Company’s willingness to view local development issues from a resident-centered perspective, raising concerns for quality of life that showed an allegiance to the area beyond expanding their market.

Dreher’s willingness to view the development issue from the community’s perspective pioneered a strategy of suburban shopping center community relations that became commonplace in the postwar period, successfully convincing many suburban residents that shopping centers could occupy a space that bridged the suburban home/commerce divide by situating the shopping center as a new kind of public space in which suburban values of domesticity were balanced against commercial growth and continued urban development. Unlike the earlier Suburban Company, Dreher willingly utilized space in the Square for non-remunerative purposes and genuine public services. During World War II, Suburban Square effectively served as the center of the Main Line’s patriotic homefront activities. Dreher gave free space in the Square to the American Red Cross for their Main Line Headquarters and helped to raise nearly \$600,000 for the organization.²⁶ He sold government war bonds and stamps in his stores, and allowed the shopping center to be used for patriotic parades. After the war, the Square continued to serve as a center for

²³ *Main Line Times*, Jan. 4, 1945.

²⁴ *Main Line Times*, March 20, 1941.

²⁵ Dreher letter to Raymond Johnson, Jan. 6, 1939; Albert M Greenfield letter to Dreher, Jan. 9, 1939; Albert M. Greenfield Papers Box 93 Folder 37.

²⁶ *Main Line Times*, Jan. 15, 1944, April 20, 1944.

community socializing and public events. Beginning in 1949 and continuing for many years, the Square became the home of the “Devon Fair on the Square,” a fair connected with the Devon Horse Show, the largest charity event of Main Line Society. The fair drew 30,000 visitors its first year, sealing the shopping center’s social as well as commercial importance at the center of Main Line life. One local commentator noted that the fair demonstrated “the naturalness of this centralized suburban shopping district for community affairs.”²⁷

Dreher’s attempts to position Suburban Square as a middle ground, a public space integrating the residential and commercial spaces of Ardmore life succeeded in deepening the local community’s ties to the center, but failed to erase Ardmore’s home/commerce divide. As Dreher recognized, the center’s acceptance by local residents remained hinged on its containment; consequently, at no time during the 1940s did the Suburban Company back any zoning variances to expand the shopping center. Instead, the Suburban Company undertook other projects on larger parcels of land in urban areas and the new postwar suburbs more amenable to commercial zoning.²⁸ No doubt the lack of expansion possibilities motivated the firm to sell the Square. Yet it is a testament to the perceived value of the Square that despite its smallness, its age, and a commercial appraisal at \$3.5 million and declining in 1948,²⁹ it sold for \$5 million in 1950.³⁰ At the time of its sale, Suburban Square was being hailed as “world famous”³¹ and “revolutionary”³² by local Ardmore papers, having gained a degree of social acceptance far removed from its origins.

Between the Community and the Market: Business and the Transformation of Suburbia

By the postwar period, the Main Line had undergone radical growth and change that remade its classic suburban landscape into something new: a populous region whose commercial and public spaces served not to make the area more like an industrial city like Philadelphia, but to enhance its local autonomy in order to preserve its suburban way of life – to continue “holding the line” against Philadelphia, in the words of James Michener [Michener, 1950, p. 46]. Suburban Square was a key element of this new Main Line for Michener; he lauded Frederick Dreher as a progressive merchant whose auto-friendly shopping center and quality stores drew “Main Liners...from twenty miles to shop at his center, where they can get almost anything sold in city stores” [Michener, 48]. Main Liners, including Ardmore residents, had embraced the Square as an ally in preserving their suburban way of life; but this hardly meant

²⁷ *Ardmore Chronicle*, April 28, 1949.

²⁸ City Line Center (1949) and Cheltenham Center (ca. 1952) in suburban Philadelphia; Dreher also planned centers in Camden, NJ and Wilmington, DE that were never built [Longstreth 1997a].

²⁹ Jackson-Cross Realty, *Appraisal of Suburban Square* (1948), S&C Papers Box 34.

³⁰ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 15, 1950.

³¹ *Ardmore Chronicle*, Feb. 9, 1950.

³² *Main Line Times*, March 16, 1950.

they fully embraced commerce in their midst or accepted the centering of a regional market in their backyard. Though shopping centers appeared elsewhere on Main Line highways in the postwar period, their arrivals were met by new rounds of protest over potential effects on property values, quality of life, and small business, countered increasingly by arguments for the necessity of tax ratables and tourism during the postwar period. The Main Line's long legacy of suburban affluence insulated the area from the siren song of commercial tax ratables that seduced many suburbs in the postwar period.³³ By the 1960s, Ardmore's commercial center would be overshadowed by nearby King of Prussia, a commercially-dominated area that reflected the maturation of suburban markets into complex regional centers, variously described as "edge cities," "technoburbs," or "centerless cities" [Garreau, 1991; Fishman, 1987; Jackson, 1986].

The transition to this new kind of urban form was a long and contested process that entailed changing definitions of market and the suburban home/commerce divide. Throughout this paper, I have attempted to show that this change in the built environment was a cultural as well as spatial shift – and that the shopping center, both as a place and as a social actor, was a decisive agent in the transformation. This is just one example of the myriad ways in which business interacts with other social actors across time and space, having an impact outside firms that goes from market exchange into the very process of constructing our everyday landscapes of meaning.

References

- Abbott, Carl, "Thinking About Cities: The Central Tradition in U.S. Urban History," *Journal of Urban History*, 22 (1996), 687-701.
- Ardmore Chronicle* (Ardmore, PA).
- Baker, Geoffrey and Bruno Funaro, *Shopping Centers: Design and Operation* (New York, 1951).
- Bean, Jonathan, "Beyond the Broker State: A History of the Federal Government's Policies Toward Small Business, 1936-1961" (Ph.D. dissertation, Ohio State University, 1995).
- Clarke, Sally, "Consumer Negotiations," *Business and Economic History*, 26 (Fall 1997), 101-122.
- Cohen, Elizabeth, "From Town Center to Shopping Center: The Reconfiguration of Community Marketplaces in postwar America," *American Historical Review*, 101 (Fall 1996).
- Cronon, William, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, 1991).
- Fullerton, Ronald, "Art of Public Relations: U.S. Dept. Stores, 1876-1923," *Public Relations Review*, 16 (Fall 1990), 68.
- Galambos, Louis, "What Makes Us Think We Can Put Business Back into American History?" *Business and Economic History*, 22 (1992), 1-11.
- Garreau, Joel, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (New York, 1991)
- Gilfoyle, Timothy, "White Cities, Linguistic Turns, and Disneylands: The New Paradigms of Urban History," *Reviews in American History*, 26 (1998), 175-204.

³³ Suburban Square was one of the largest tax payers in Lower Merion Township. By 1950, the center property totaled 4% of Ardmore's total tax ratables [Montgomery County Tax Assessments (1950), Montgomery County Archives, Norristown PA]. Yet I do not think this factor played a very large role in public acceptance of the center during the interwar period. Lower Merion Township did not assess commercial properties or tax business income at a higher rate than personal property during this period, and thus didn't recognize businesses as uniquely desirable tax ratable.

- Albert M. Greenfield Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.
- Hanchett, Thomas, "U.S. Tax Policies and the Shopping Center Boom of the 1950s and 1960s," *American Historical Review*, 101 (Fall 1996).
- Hays, Samuel, "From the History of the City to the History of the Urbanized Society," *Journal of Urban History*, 19 (1993), 3-25.
- Jackson, Kenneth, "All the World's a Mall: Reflections on the Social and Economic Consequences of the American Shopping Center," *American Historical Review*, 101 (Fall 1996).
———, *Crabgrass Frontier: the Suburbanization of the United States* (New York, 1986).
- Leach, William, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York, 1993).
- Lief, Alfred, *Family Business: A Century in the Life and Times of S&C* (New York, 1968).
- Lipartito, Kenneth, "Culture and the Practice of Business History," *Business and Economic History*, 24 (Winter 1995), 1-41.
- Longstreth, Richard, "The Diffusion of the Community Shopping Center Concept in the Interwar Decades," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 56 (September 1997), 268-293.
———, *From City Center to Regional Mall: Architecture, the Automobile, and Retailing in Los Angeles, 1920-1950* (Cambridge, 1997).
- Main Line Daily Times* (Ardmore, PA).
- Main Line Times* (Ardmore, PA).
- Main Liner* (Ardmore, PA).
- Michener, James, "The Main Line," *Holiday*, 7 (April 1950), 34-57, 134.
- Monod, David, *Store Wars: Shopkeepers and the Cultures of Mass Marketing, 1890-1939* (Toronto, 1996).
- Our Town* (Narberth, PA)
- Scranton, Philip, "The Significance of Spatial Theory for Business History," *Business and Economic History*, 25 (1996), 65-71.
- Strawbridge & Clothier Papers, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE [S&C].