

## THE TERRAZZO JUNGLE

*Fifty years ago, the mall was born. America would never be the same.*

The New Yorker  
Malcolm Gladwell  
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Victor Gruen was short, stout, and unstoppable, with a wild head of hair and eyebrows like unpruned hedgerows. According to a profile in *Fortune* (and people loved to profile Victor Gruen), he was a “torrential talker with eyes as bright as mica and a mind as fast as mercury.” In the office, he was famous for keeping two or three secretaries working full time, as he moved from one to the next, dictating non-stop in his thick Viennese accent. He grew up in the well-to-do world of prewar Jewish Vienna, studying architecture at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts—the same school that, a few years previously, had turned down a fledgling artist named Adolf Hitler. At night, he performed satirical cabaret theatre in smoke-filled cafés. He emigrated in 1938, the same week as Freud, when one of his theatre friends dressed up as a Nazi Storm Trooper and drove him and his wife to the airport. They took the first plane they could catch to Zurich, made their way to England, and then boarded the S.S. Statendam for New York, landing, as Gruen later remembered, “with an architect’s degree, eight dollars, and no English.” On the voyage over, he was told by an American to set his sights high—“don’t try to wash dishes or be a waiter, we have millions of them”—but Gruen scarcely needed the advice. He got together with some other German émigrés and formed the Refugee Artists Group. George S. Kaufman’s wife was their biggest fan. Richard Rodgers and Al Jolson gave them money. Irving Berlin helped them with their music. Gruen got on the train to Princeton and came back with a letter of recommendation from Albert Einstein. By the summer of 1939, the group was on Broadway, playing eleven weeks at the Music Box. Then, as M. Jeffrey Hartwick recounts in “Mall Maker,” his new biography of Gruen, one day he went for a walk in midtown and ran into an old friend from Vienna, Ludwig Lederer, who wanted to open a leather-goods boutique on Fifth Avenue. Victor agreed to design it, and the result was a revolutionary storefront, with a kind of mini-arcade in the entranceway, roughly seventeen by fifteen feet: six exquisite glass cases, spotlights, and faux marble, with green corrugated glass on the ceiling. It was a “customer trap.” This was a brand-new idea in American retail design, particularly on Fifth Avenue, where all the carriage-trade storefronts were flush with the street. The critics raved. Gruen designed *Ciro’s* on Fifth Avenue, *Steckler’s* on Broadway, *Paris Decorators* on the Bronx Concourse, and eleven branches of the California clothing chain *Grayson’s*. In the early fifties, he designed an outdoor shopping center called *Northland* outside Detroit for J. L. Hudson’s. It covered a hundred and sixty-three acres and had nearly ten thousand parking spaces. This was little more than a decade and a half since he stepped off the boat, and when Gruen watched the bulldozers break ground he turned to his partner and said, “My God but we’ve got a lot of nerve.”

But Gruen’s most famous creation was his next project, in the town of Edina, just outside Minneapolis. He began work on it almost exactly fifty years ago. It was called *Southdale*. It cost twenty million dollars, and had seventy-two stores and two anchor department-store tenants, *Donaldson’s* and *Dayton’s*. Until then, most shopping centers had been what architects like to call “extroverted,” meaning that store windows and entrances faced both the parking area and the interior pedestrian walkways. *Southdale* was introverted: the exterior walls were blank, and all the activity was focussed on the inside. Suburban

shopping centers had always been in the open, with stores connected by outdoor passageways. Gruen had the idea of putting the whole complex under one roof, with air-conditioning for the summer and heat for the winter. Almost every other major shopping center had been built on a single level, which made for punishingly long walks. Gruen put stores on two levels, connected by escalators and fed by two-tiered parking. In the middle he put a kind of town square, a “garden court” under a skylight, with a fishpond, enormous sculpted trees, a twenty-one-foot cage filled with bright-colored birds, balconies with hanging plants, and a café. The result, Hardwick writes, was a sensation:

Journalists from all of the country’s top magazines came for the Minneapolis shopping center’s opening. *Life*, *Fortune*, *Time*, *Women’s Wear Daily*, the *New York Times*, *Business Week* and *Newsweek* all covered the event. The national and local press wore out superlatives attempting to capture the feeling of Southdale. “The Splashest Center in the U. S.,” *Lifesang*. The glossy weekly praised the incongruous combination of a “goldfish pond, birds, art and 10 acres of stores all . . . under one Minnesota roof.” A “pleasure-dome-with-parking,” *Time* cheered. One journalist announced that overnight Southdale had become an integral “part of the American Way.”

Southdale Mall still exists. It is situated off I-494, south of downtown Minneapolis and west of the airport—a big concrete box in a sea of parking. The anchor tenants are now J. C. Penney and Marshall Field’s, and there is an Ann Taylor and a Sunglass Hut and a Foot Locker and just about every other chain store that you’ve ever seen in a mall. It does not seem like a historic building, which is precisely why it is one. Fifty years ago, Victor Gruen designed a fully enclosed, introverted, multitiered, double-anchor-tenant shopping complex with a garden court under a skylight—and today virtually every regional shopping center in America is a fully enclosed, introverted, multitiered, double-anchor-tenant complex with a garden court under a skylight. Victor Gruen didn’t design a building; he designed an archetype. For a decade, he gave speeches about it and wrote books and met with one developer after another and waved his hands in the air excitedly, and over the past half century that archetype has been reproduced so faithfully on so many thousands of occasions that today virtually every suburban American goes shopping or wanders around or hangs out in a Southdale facsimile at least once or twice a month. Victor Gruen may well have been the most influential architect of the twentieth century. He invented the mall.

One of Gruen’s contemporaries in the early days of the mall was a man named A. Alfred Taubman, who also started out as a store designer. In 1950, when Taubman was still in his twenties, he borrowed five thousand dollars, founded his own development firm, and, three years later, put up a twenty-six-store open-air shopping center in Flint, Michigan. A few years after that, inspired by Gruen, he matched Southdale with an enclosed mall of his own in Hayward, California, and over the next half century Taubman put together what is widely considered one of the finest collections of shopping malls in the world. The average American mall has annual sales of around three hundred and forty dollars per square foot. Taubman’s malls average sales close to five hundred dollars per square foot. If Victor Gruen invented the mall, Alfred Taubman perfected it. One day not long ago, I asked Taubman to take me to one of his shopping centers and explain whatever it was that first drew people like him and Victor Gruen to the enclosed mall fifty years ago.

Taubman, who just turned eighty, is an imposing man with a wry sense of humor who wears bespoke three-piece suits and peers down at the world through half-closed eyes. He is the sort of old-fashioned man who refers to merchandise as “goods” and apparel as “soft goods” and who can glance at a couture gown from halfway across the room and come within a few dollars of its price. Recently, Taubman’s fortunes took

a turn for the worse when Sotheby's, which he bought in 1983, ran afoul of antitrust laws and he ended up serving a year-long prison sentence on price-fixing charges. Then his company had to fend off a hostile takeover bid led by Taubman's archrival, the Indianapolis-based Simon Property Group. But, on a recent trip from his Manhattan offices to the Mall at Short Hills, a half hour's drive away in New Jersey, Taubman was in high spirits. Short Hills holds a special place in his heart. "When I bought that property in 1980, there were only seven stores that were still in business," Taubman said, sitting in the back of his limousine. "It was a disaster. It was done by a large commercial architect who didn't understand what he was doing." Turning it around took four renovations. Bonwit Teller and B. Altman—two of the original anchor tenants—were replaced by Neiman Marcus, Saks, Nordstrom, and Macy's. Today, Short Hills has average sales of nearly eight hundred dollars per square foot; according to the Greenberg Group, it is the third-most-successful covered mall in the country. When Taubman and I approached the mall, the first thing he did was peer out at the parking garage. It was just before noon on a rainy Thursday. The garage was almost full. "Look at all the cars!" he said, happily.

Taubman directed the driver to stop in front of Bloomingdale's, on the mall's north side. He walked through the short access corridor, paused, and pointed at the floor. It was made up of small stone tiles. "People used to use monolithic terrazzo in centers," he said. "But it cracked easily and was difficult to repair. Women, especially, tend to have thin soles. We found that they are very sensitive to the surface, and when they get on one of those terrazzo floors it's like a skating rink. They like to walk on the joints. The only direct contact you have with the building is through the floor. How you feel about it is very important." Then he looked up and pointed to the second floor of the mall. The handrails were transparent. "We don't want anything to disrupt the view," Taubman said. If you're walking on the first level, he explained, you have to be able, at all times, to have an unimpeded line of sight not just to the stores in front of you but also to the stores on the second level. The idea is to overcome what Taubman likes to call "threshold resistance," which is the physical and psychological barrier that stands between a shopper and the inside of a store. "You buy something because it is available and attractive," Taubman said. "You can't have any obstacles. The goods have to be all there." When Taubman was designing stores in Detroit, in the nineteen-forties, he realized that even the best arcades, like those Gruen designed on Fifth Avenue, weren't nearly as good at overcoming threshold resistance as an enclosed mall, because with an arcade you still had to get the customer through the door. "People assume we enclose the space because of air-conditioning and the weather, and that's important," Taubman said. "But the main reason is that it allows us to open up the store to the customer."

Taubman began making his way down the mall. He likes the main corridors of his shopping malls to be no more than a thousand feet long—the equivalent of about three city blocks—because he believes that three blocks is about as far as peak shopping interest can be sustained, and as he walked he explained the logic behind what retailers like to call "adjacencies." There was Brooks Brothers, where a man might buy a six-hundred-dollar suit, right across from Johnston & Murphy, where the same man might buy a two-hundred-dollar pair of shoes. The Bose electronics store was next to Brookstone and across from the Sharper Image, so if you got excited about some electronic gizmo in one store you were steps away from getting even more excited by similar gizmos in two other stores. Gucci, Versace, and Chanel were placed near the highest-end department stores, Neiman Marcus and Saks. "Lots of developers just rent out their space like you'd cut a salami," Taubman explained. "They rent the space based on whether it fits, not

necessarily on whether it makes any sense.” Taubman shook his head. He gestured to a Legal Sea Foods restaurant, where he wanted to stop for lunch. It was off the main mall, at the far end of a short entry hallway, and it was down there for a reason. A woman about to spend five thousand dollars at Versace doesn’t want to catch a whiff of sautéed grouper as she tries on an evening gown. More to the point, people eat at Legal Sea Foods only during the lunch and dinner hours—which means that if you put the restaurant in the thick of things, you’d have a dead spot in the middle of your mall for most of the day.

At the far end of the mall is Neiman Marcus, and Taubman wandered in, exclaimed over a tray of men’s ties, and delicately examined the stitching in the women’s evening gowns in the designer department. “Hi, my name is Alfred Taubman—I’m your landlord,” he said, bending over to greet a somewhat startled sales assistant. Taubman plainly loves Neiman Marcus, and with good reason: well-run department stores are the engines of malls. They have powerful brand names, advertise heavily, and carry extensive cosmetics lines (shopping malls are, at bottom, delivery systems for lipstick)—all of which generate enormous shopping traffic. The point of a mall—the reason so many stores are clustered together in one building—is to allow smaller, less powerful retailers to share in that traffic. A shopping center is an exercise in coöperative capitalism. It is considered successful (and the mall owner makes the most money) when the maximum number of department-store customers are lured into the mall.

Why, for instance, are so many malls, like Short Hills, two stories? Back at his office, on Fifth Avenue, Taubman took a piece of paper and drew a simple cross-section of a two-story building. “You have two levels, all right? You have an escalator here and an escalator here.” He drew escalators at both ends of the floors. “The customer comes into the mall, walks down the hall, gets on the escalator up to the second level. Goes back along the second floor, down the escalator, and now she’s back where she started from. She’s seen every store in the center, right? Now you put on a third level. Is there any reason to go up there? No.” A full circuit of a two-level mall takes you back to the beginning. It encourages you to circulate through the whole building. A full circuit of a three-level mall leaves you at the opposite end of the mall from your car. Taubman was the first to put a ring road around the mall—which he did at his mall in Hayward—for the same reason: if you want to get shoppers into every part of the building, they should be distributed to as many different entry points as possible. At Short Hills—and at most Taubman malls—the ring road rises gently as you drive around the building, so at least half of the mall entrances are on the second floor. “We put fifteen per cent more parking on the upper level than on the first level, because people flow like water,” Taubman said. “They go down much easier than they go up. And we put our vertical transportation—the escalators—on the ends, so shoppers have to make the full loop.”

This is the insight that drove the enthusiasm for the mall fifty years ago—that by putting everything under one roof, the retailer and the developer gained, for the first time, complete control over their environment. Taubman fusses about lighting, for instance: he believes that next to the skylights you have to put tiny lights that will go on when the natural light fades, so the dusk doesn’t send an unwelcome signal to shoppers that it is time to go home; and you have to recess the skylights so that sunlight never reflects off the storefront glass, obscuring merchandise. Can you optimize lighting in a traditional downtown? The same goes for parking. Suppose that there was a downtown where the biggest draw was a major department store. Ideally, you ought to put the garage across the street and two blocks away, so shoppers, on their way from their cars and to their destination, would pass by the stores in between—dramatically increasing the traffic for all the intervening merchants. But in a downtown, obviously, you can’t put a parking

garage just anywhere, and even if you could, you couldn't insure that the stores in that high-traffic corridor had the optimal adjacencies, or that the sidewalk would feel right under the thin soles of women's shoes. And because the stores are arrayed along a road with cars on it, you don't really have a mall where customers can wander from side to side. And what happens when they get to the department store? It's four or five floors high, and shoppers are like water, remember: they flow downhill. So it's going to be hard to generate traffic on the upper levels. There is a tendency in America to wax nostalgic for the traditional downtown, but those who first believed in the mall—and understood its potential—found it hard to look at the old downtown with anything but frustration.

“In Detroit, prior to the nineteen-fifties, the large department stores, like Hudson's, controlled everything, like zoning,” Taubman said. “They were generous to local politicians. They had enormous clout, and that's why when Sears wanted to locate in downtown Detroit they were told they couldn't. So Sears put a store in Highland Park and on Oakland Boulevard, and built a store on the East Side, and it was able to get some other stores to come with them, and before long there were three mini-downtowns in the suburbs. They used to call them hot spots.” This happened more than half a century ago. But it was clear that Taubman has never quite got over how irrational the world outside the mall can be: downtown Detroit chased away traffic.

Planning and control were of even greater importance to Gruen. He was, after all, a socialist—and he was Viennese. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Vienna had demolished the walls and other fortifications that had ringed the city since medieval times, and in the resulting open space built the Ringstrasse—a meticulously articulated addition to the old city. Architects and urban planners solemnly outlined their ideas. There were apartment blocks, and public squares and government buildings, and shopping arcades, each executed in what was thought to be the historically appropriate style. The Rathaus was done in high Gothic; the Burgtheatre in early Baroque; the University was pure Renaissance; and the Parliament was classical Greek. It was all part of the official Viennese response to the populist uprisings of 1848: if Austria was to remake itself as a liberal democracy, Vienna had to be physically remade along democratic lines. The Parliament now faced directly onto the street. The walls that separated the élite of Vienna from the unwashed in the suburbs were torn down. And, most important, a ring road, or Ringstrasse—a grand mall—was built around the city, with wide sidewalks and expansive urban views, where Viennese of all backgrounds could mingle freely on their Sundayafternoon stroll. To the Viennese reformers of the time, the quality of civic life was a function of the quality of the built environment, and Gruen thought that principle applied just as clearly to the American suburbs.

Not long after Southdale was built, Gruen gave the keynote address at a Progressive Architecture awards ceremony in New Orleans, and he took the occasion to lash out at American suburbia, whose roads, he said, were “avenues of horror,” “flanked by the greatest collection of vulgarity—billboards, motels, gas stations, shanties, car lots, miscellaneous industrial equipment, hot dog stands, wayside stores—ever collected by mankind.” American suburbia was chaos, and the only solution to chaos was planning. When Gruen first drew up the plans for Southdale, he placed the shopping center at the heart of a tidy four-hundred-and-sixty-three-acre development, complete with apartment buildings, houses, schools, a medical center, a park, and a lake. Southdale was not a suburban alternative to downtown Minneapolis. It was the Minneapolis downtown you would get if you started over and corrected all the mistakes that were made the

first time around. “There is nothing suburban about Southdale except its location,” *Architectural Record* stated when it reviewed Gruen’s new creation. It is

an imaginative distillation of what makes downtown magnetic: the variety, the individuality, the lights, the color, even the crowds—for Southdale’s pedestrian-scale spaces insure a busyness and a bustle. Added to this essence of existing downtowns are all kinds of things that ought to be there if downtown weren’t so noisy and dirty and chaotic—sidewalk cafés, art, islands of planting, pretty paving. Other shopping centers, however pleasant, seem provincial in contrast with the real thing—the city downtown. But in Minneapolis, it is the downtown that appears pokey and provincial in contrast with Southdale’s metropolitan character.

One person who wasn’t dazzled by Southdale was Frank Lloyd Wright. “What is this, a railroad station or a bus station?” he asked, when he came for a tour. “You’ve got a garden court that has all the evils of the village street and none of its charm.” But no one much listened to Frank Lloyd Wright. When it came to malls, it was only Victor Gruen’s vision that mattered.

Victor Gruen’s grand plan for Southdale was never realized. There were no parks or schools or apartment buildings—just that big box in a sea of parking. Nor, with a few exceptions, did anyone else plan the shopping mall as the centerpiece of a tidy, dense, multi-use development. Gruen was right about the transformative effect of the mall on retailing. But in thinking that he could reënact the lesson of the Ringstrasse in American suburbia he was wrong, and the reason was that in the mid-nineteen-fifties the economics of mall-building suddenly changed.

At the time of Southdale, big shopping centers were a delicate commercial proposition. One of the first big postwar shopping centers was Shopper’s World, in Framingham, Massachusetts, designed by an old business partner of Gruen’s from his Fifth Avenue storefront days. Shopper’s World was an open center covering seventy acres, with forty-four stores, six thousand parking spaces, and a two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand-square-foot Jordan Marsh department store—and within two years of its opening, in 1951, the developer was bankrupt. A big shopping center simply cost too much money, and it took too long for a developer to make that money back. Gruen thought of the mall as the centerpiece of a carefully planned new downtown because he felt that that was the only way malls would ever get built: you planned because you had to plan. Then, in the mid-fifties, something happened that turned the dismal economics of the mall upside down: Congress made a radical change in the tax rules governing depreciation.

Under tax law, if you build an office building, or buy a piece of machinery for your factory, or make any capital purchase for your business, that investment is assumed to deteriorate and lose some part of its value from wear and tear every year. As a result, a business is allowed to set aside some of its income, tax-free, to pay for the eventual cost of replacing capital investments. For tax purposes, in the early fifties the useful life of a building was held to be forty years, so a developer could deduct one-fortieth of the value of his building from his income every year. A new forty-million-dollar mall, then, had an annual depreciation deduction of a million dollars. What Congress did in 1954, in an attempt to stimulate investment in manufacturing, was to “accelerate” the depreciation process for new construction. Now, using this and other tax loopholes, a mall developer could recoup the cost of his investment in a fraction of the time. As the historian Thomas Hanchett argues, in a groundbreaking paper in *The American Historical Review*, the result was a “bonanza” for developers. In the first few years after a shopping center was built, the depreciation deductions were so large that the mall was almost certainly losing money, at least on paper—which brought with it enormous tax benefits. For instance, in a front-page article in 1961 on the effect of the

depreciation changes, the *Wall Street Journal* described the finances of a real-estate investment company called Kratter Corp. Kratter's revenue from its real-estate operations in 1960 was \$9,997,043. Deductions from operating expenses and mortgage interest came to \$4,836,671, which left a healthy income of \$5.16 million. Then came depreciation, which came to \$6.9 million, so now Kratter's healthy profit had been magically turned into a "loss" of \$1.76 million. Imagine that you were one of five investors in Kratter. The company's policy was to distribute nearly all of its pre-depreciation revenue to its investors, so your share of their earnings would be roughly a million dollars. Ordinarily, you'd pay a good chunk of that in taxes. But that million dollars wasn't income. After depreciation, Kratter didn't make any money. That million dollars was "return on capital," and it was tax-free.

Suddenly it was possible to make much more money investing in things like shopping centers than buying stocks, so money poured into real-estate investment companies. Prices rose dramatically. Investors were putting up buildings, taking out as much money from them as possible using accelerated depreciation, then selling them four or five years later at a huge profit—whereupon they built an even bigger building, because the more expensive the building was, the more the depreciation allowance was worth.

Under the circumstances, who cared whether the shopping center made economic sense for the vendors? Shopping centers and strip malls became what urban planners call "catalytic," meaning that developers weren't building them to serve existing suburban communities; they were building them on the fringes of cities, beyond residential developments, where the land was cheapest. Hanchett points out, in fact, that in many cases the growth of malls appears to follow no demographic logic at all. Cortland, New York, for instance, barely grew at all between 1950 and 1970. Yet in those two decades Cortland gained six new shopping plazas, including the four-hundred-thousand-square-foot enclosed Cortlandville Mall. In the same twenty-year span, the Scranton area actually shrank by seventy-three thousand people while gaining thirty-one shopping centers, including three enclosed malls. In 1953, before accelerated depreciation was put in place, one major regional shopping center was built in the United States. Three years later, after the law was passed, that number was twenty-five. In 1953, new shopping-center construction of all kinds totalled six million square feet. By 1956, that figure had increased five hundred per cent. This was also the era that fast-food restaurants and Howard Johnsons and Holiday Inns and muffler shops and convenience stores began to multiply up and down the highways and boulevards of the American suburbs—and as these developments grew, others followed to share in the increased customer traffic. Malls led to malls, and in turn those malls led to the big stand-alone retailers like Wal-Mart and Target, and then the "power centers" of three or four big-box retailers, like Circuit City, Staples, Barnes & Noble. Victor Gruen intended Southdale to be a dense, self-contained downtown. Today, fifteen minutes down an "avenue of horror" from Southdale is the Mall of America, the largest mall in the country, with five hundred and twenty stores, fifty restaurants, and twelve thousand parking spaces—and one can easily imagine that one day it, too, may give way to something newer and bigger.

Once, in the mid-fifties, Victor Gruen sat down with a writer from *The New Yorker's* Talk of the Town to give his thoughts on how to save New York City. The interview took place in Gruen's stylish offices on West Twelfth Street, in an old Stanford White building, and one can only imagine the reporter, rapt, as Gruen held forth, eyebrows bristling. First, Gruen said, Manhattan had to get rid of its warehouses and its light manufacturing. Then, all the surface traffic in midtown—the taxis, buses, and trucks—had to be directed into underground tunnels. He wanted to put superhighways around the perimeter of the island, buttressed

by huge double-decker parking garages. The jumble of tenements and town houses and apartment blocks that make up Manhattan would be replaced by neat rows of hundred-and-fifty-story residential towers, arrayed along a ribbon of gardens, parks, walkways, theatres, and cafés.

Mr. Gruen lowered his brows and glared at us. "You are troubled by all those tunnels, are you not?" he inquired. "You wonder whether there is room for them in the present underground jungle of pipes and wires. Did you never think how absurd it is to bury beneath tons of solid pavement equipment that is bound to go on the blink from time to time?" He leaped from his chair and thrust an imaginary pneumatic drill against his polished study floor. "Rat-a-tat-tat!" he exclaimed. "Night and day! Tear up the streets! Then pave them! Then tear 'em up again!" Flinging aside the imaginary drill, he threw himself back in his chair. "In my New York of the future, all pipes and wires will be strung along the upper sides of those tunnels, above a catwalk, accessible to engineers and painted brilliant colors to delight rather than appall the eye."

Postwar America was an intellectually insecure place, and there was something intoxicating about Gruen's sophistication and confidence. That was what took him, so dramatically, from standing at New York Harbor with eight dollars in his pocket to Broadway, to Fifth Avenue, and to the heights of Northland and Southdale. He was a European intellectual, an émigré, and, in the popular mind, the European émigré represented vision, the gift of seeing something grand in the banality of postwar American life. When the European visionary confronted a drab and congested urban landscape, he didn't tinker and equivocate; he levelled warehouses and buried roadways and came up with a thrilling plan for making things right. "The chief means of travel will be walking," Gruen said, of his reimagined metropolis. "Nothing like walking for peace of mind." At Northland, he said, thousands of people would show up, even when the stores were closed, just to walk around. It was exactly like Sunday on the Ringstrasse. With the building of the mall, Old World Europe had come to suburban Detroit.

What Gruen had, as well, was an unshakable faith in the American marketplace. Malls teach us, he once said, that "it's the merchants who will save our urban civilization. 'Planning' isn't a dirty word to them; good planning means good business." He went on, "Sometimes self-interest has remarkable spiritual consequences." Gruen needed to believe this, as did so many European intellectuals from that period, dubbed by the historian Daniel Horowitz "celebratory émigrés." They had fled a place of chaos and anxiety, and in American consumer culture they sought a bulwark against the madness across the ocean. They wanted to find in the jumble of the American marketplace something as grand as the Vienna they had lost—the place where the unconscious was meticulously dissected by Dr. Freud on Berggasse, and where shrines to European civilization—to the Gothic, the Baroque, the Renaissance, and the ancient Greek traditions—were erected on the Ringstrasse. To Americans, nothing was more flattering than this. Who didn't want to believe that the act of levelling warehouses and burying roadways had spiritual consequences? But it was, in the end, too good to be true. This wasn't the way America worked at all.

A few months ago, Alfred Taubman gave a speech to a real-estate trade association in Detroit, about the prospects for the city's downtown, and one of the things he talked about was Victor Gruen's Northland. It was simply too big, Taubman said. Hudson's, the Northland anchor tenant, already had a flagship store in downtown Detroit. So why did Gruen build a six-hundred-thousand-square-foot satellite at Northland, just a twenty-minute drive away? Satellites were best at a hundred and fifty thousand to two hundred thousand square feet. But at six hundred thousand square feet they were large enough to carry every merchandise line that the flagship store carried, which meant no one had any reason to make the trek to the flagship anymore. Victor Gruen said the lesson of Northland was that the merchants would save urban civilization.

He didn't appreciate that it made a lot more sense, for his client, to save civilization at a hundred and fifty thousand square feet than at six hundred thousand square feet. The lesson of America was that the grandest of visions could be derailed by the most banal of details, like the size of the retail footprint, or whether Congress set the depreciation allowance at forty years or twenty years.

When, late in life, Gruen came to realize this, it was a powerfully disillusioning experience. He revisited one of his old shopping centers, and saw all the sprawling development around it, and pronounced himself in "severe emotional shock." Malls, he said, had been disfigured by "the ugliness and discomfort of the land-wasting seas of parking" around them. Developers were interested only in profit. "I refuse to pay alimony for those bastard developments," he said in a speech in London, in 1978. He turned away from his adopted country. He had fixed up a country house outside of Vienna, and soon he moved back home for good. But what did he find when he got there? Just south of old Vienna, a mall had been built—in his anguished words, a "gigantic shopping machine." It was putting the beloved independent shopkeepers of Vienna out of business. It was crushing the life of his city. He was devastated. Victor Gruen invented the shopping mall in order to make America more like Vienna. He ended up making Vienna more like America. ♦