

## **"Burgers! Shakes!" How the evolving architecture of fast-food chains has shaped the character of America's roadside landscape**

By: Philip Langdon

ROADSIDE AMERICA -- WHAT AN INSISTENT JUMBLE IT is, with its jarring mix of gas stations and garden centers, car washes and convenience stores, motels and muffler shops, eating places, parking spaces, night spots, sales lots, and a thousand other manifestations of commerce at its most competitive.

The American highway has always felt the hand of commercialization. William Dean Howells, in the 1880s, had a character in one of his novels boast about the number of New England boulders he had painted with three-color advertising. But by far the most extensive impact of business on everyday roadside surroundings has occurred since the Second World War.

It has been a period in which the structures housing ordinary commercial activities have had to accommodate the automobile and attract the traveler's attention; that much everybody knows. What makes the phenomenon intriguing is the way in which these buildings have reflected the instincts of building owners, the attitudes of some unusual times, and the influence of eminent designers--all while meeting their primary business objectives.

Three years ago I set out to trace the architectural evolution of the one kind of building that has been pervasive enough, conspicuous enough, and malleable enough to embody the changing character of our roadside surroundings--the chain restaurant, and in particular the fast-food restaurant. Fast-food-chain outlets respond to new conditions more rapidly than perhaps any other retail structure. The designer of a chain restaurant, unlike the architect of a church, a museum, or some such serious cultural monument, can respond wholeheartedly to the spirit of the times, without worrying about how the colors, textures, and forms will look thirty or fifty years in the future. In the restaurant industry it is assumed that daily wear and tear on the interior, not to mention the periodic need for a fresh decorating scheme, will mandate renovation within a few years. Chain restaurants act as a barometer of the public mood.

Fast-food chains are especially significant from an architectural point of view, because they are ubiquitous. McDonald's, which was considered a large chain in 1960, when it had 238 restaurants, entered 1985 with more than 6,500 outlets in the United States and more than 8,000 worldwide; it has recently been adding a new outlet every seventeen hours. Each day over six percent of the American people eat at a McDonald's restaurant. Kentucky Fried Chicken has 4,500 U.S. restaurants, Pizza Hut has 4,300, Burger King 3,500, Wendy's 3,300, and Hardee's 2,400. In all, more than 340 chains are supervising 60,000 fast-food restaurants in the United States, and substantial numbers of other chains exist outside the fast-food segment of the industry. Denny's, the leader among coffee shops and family restaurants, runs 1,100 restaurants.

It is estimated that two-fifths of all the restaurant employees in the United States now work for chains.

Fast-food restaurants have succeeded in deploying their standardized images from coast to coast. In a country of highly varied climate and terrain, thousands of cities and towns now look as if they were put together with interchangeable parts.

THE STORY THAT EVENTUALLY UNFOLDED SO DRAMATICALLY throughout the United States began in San Bernardino, California, in 1952. Richard McDonald sat in the office behind his drive-in restaurant on E Street, sketching what he hoped would be the restaurant of the future. On a sheet of typing paper he drew a building with columns like those on the spacious two-story Colonial-style house where he lived with his wife and his brother and business partner, Maurice ("Mac"). The sketch left him dissatisfied. Colonial lacked the power he wanted, and besides, the columns would get in the customers' way.

The McDonald brothers--Richard forty-three, Maurice fifty--needed a new design because, in that autumn of 1952, they were about to begin selling franchises for the "McDonald self-service system," a method of restaurant operation that they had pioneered with enormous success.

In 1940 restaurants were paying out almost 27 percent of their gross income as wages. This constituted the highest percentage for wages in any sizable segment of retailing, and by 1947 the figure had climbed to the worrisome 35 to-40-percent range. Returning veterans could settle into more attractive jobs or use their service benefits to go to college; drive-ins were having a harder time attracting and holding reliable employees. In December of 1948, tired of "drunken fry cooks and dishwashers," restless for a new way of doing things, Richard and Mac McDonald switched to a limited and rigidly standardized menu and dismissed their carhops. Self-service was the dominant trend in retailing. In clothing stores, for instance, customers could pick through merchandise displayed in the open instead of always having to ask clerks for assistance. Why wouldn't self-service work at a drive-in?

Within a few months the McDonald's drive-in's exceptional speed, combined with low prices and the elimination of tipping, attracted a sizable following--first painters, carpenters, mechanics, and clerks who wanted lunch quickly, and later teenagers and families looking for something inexpensive to eat in the afternoon and evening. Lines began to form at the windows, where fifteen-cent hamburgers, ten-cent French fries, and twenty-cent milk shakes were dispensed.

The new McDonald's system was predicated on careful attention to detail. The McDonald brothers shortened the spindles on their Multi-Mixers so that shakes and malts could be made directly in paper cups; there would be no metal mixing containers to wash, no wasted ingredients, no wasted motion, no wasted time. They developed dispensers that put the same amount of catsup or mustard on every bun. They installed a bank of infrared lamps to keep French fries hot. They used disposable paper goods instead of glassware and china. They installed a microphone to amplify the customer's

voice and reduce misunderstandings about what was being ordered. By 1952 the McDonald brothers' employees, all men dressed neatly in white, were said to be capable of serving the customer a hamburger, a beverage, French fries, and ice cream in twenty seconds. Word of their proficiency began to spread through the restaurant industry.

In May of 1952 the makers of Primex, a shortening used by the McDonalds, took out a two-page advertisement in American Restaurant magazine, the industry's premier publication, to tell about this compact, self-service drive-in capable of selling 30,000 orders of French fries a month. Two months later McDonald's, whose self-service system had chopped labor costs to less than 17 percent of gross income, was featured on the magazine's cover. By that time the sign out front announced that McDonald's had sold six million hamburgers and the brothers had been pestered by so many people interested in the details of their operation that they had begun preparing a franchise program. The cover story bolstered their confidence.

"When this hit all over the country, that is when people really began to flock out, so we knew that we had something that was going to make us some money," Richard recalls. "Sometimes there'd be probably seven or eight different people from different parts of the country out there with a piece of paper, sketching." The brothers occasionally became perturbed at people who would buy hamburgers and sit in their cars, surreptitiously taking notes, but even the clandestine copiers reinforced the McDonalds' conviction that restaurateurs (fast-food purveyors disdain the classier restaurateur) would be willing to pay a fee to duplicate the San Bernardino drive-in's equipment, procedures, layout, and menu. The McDonalds thought that the franchising package needed one more thing a building more up-to-date than the octagonal structure that had stood in San Bernardino for a dozen years. So strongly did they want the new franchised building to be efficient that they had their employees draw the floor plan in actual size, forty-four feet wide and thirty feet deep, in chalk on the tennis court behind the McDonald home; there they meticulously worked out the placement of windows and equipment to eliminate any unnecessary movement by the personnel.

THE APPEARANCE OF THE NEW BUILDING PROVED TO be a more difficult challenge. Richard McDonald consulted a couple of architects and was disappointed when they suggested what he considered to be "low, squatty little buildings." He drove to Los Angeles to talk to Douglas Honnold, an architect known for imaginative drive-ins, but it proved to be an icy encounter. After listening to McDonald lay out his ideas, Honnold replied, according to McDonald, "If you're going to tell me how to design a building, you'd better do it yourself."

"I said, 'Thank you very much,'" McDonald recalls. " 'I'll maybe do that.'"

So McDonald went on sketching. "I thought, There has to be some way to spark these buildings up." One rainy night, when business was slow, he drew a building with the roof tilted upward toward the front. "I was trying to give the building some height. Tilting the roof with a big overhang helped, but it was still on the low, squatty side." To the tilted roof he added a single arch across the front. "Well, this didn't look too bad, but

it didn't look too good, either. So then I sketched in the two arches running from the front of the building to the back, and, well, that seemed to pick the building up. So at that point I showed it to my brother, and he said, 'Hey, that looks pretty sharp.'

"So we took it to one architect, and he thought it was terrible. The basic building, he said, wasn't bad, but the terrible arches, those have got to come out. So we didn't do any business with him."

Next McDonald went to Stanley C. Meston, an architect in nearby Fontana who had worked in the 1930s with the Los Angeles restaurant architect Wayne McAllister. McDonald showed Meston his increasingly detailed idea for a rectangular building that would get structural support as well as visibility from two large arches. "He wasn't too enthused about the arches either, so I told him, You go draw the building, leave the arches off." Then McDonald visited his neon-sign supplier, George Dexter, in San Bernardino. Dexter liked the arches and encouraged McDonald to insist on them as decoration if not as structural support. By then it was clear that if Meston wanted the McDonald brothers' commission he would have to work with their ideas, and he did. He accentuated the roof shape by designing a thick, tapered soffit, for a strong, wedge-like profile. He specified large windows canted outward, like those of an airport control tower, and he accommodated the McDonalds' request for exterior walls surfaced with shiny horizontal bands of red and white tile. These would be sleek, conspicuous, and easy to maintain and the cherry red on the walls conformed with the color preferences of the architectural profession during the fifties.

Richard McDonald's sketch had called for rounded arches. By the end of the design process the arches instead projected upward in a sharp parabolic curve, a shape that strikingly evoked the spirit of modernism. Any recent architectural graduate--indeed, anyone familiar with modernism in design--would by the early 1950s have seen parabolic arches. Meston's chief draftsman, Charles Fish, who worked on the McDonald's project, had used a parabolic curve the year before in one of his student projects at the University of Cincinnati. Simple parabolic curves had been marching into the architectural mainstream for more than three decades, ever since the French engineer Eugene Freyssinet had designed and built parabolic vaulted dirigible hangars at Orly airport, outside of Paris, in the early 1920s. The most celebrated of modernists, Le Corbusier, proposed using a huge parabolic arch to support an auditorium for a Palace of the Soviets in Moscow in 1931. Eero Saarinen's 630-foot-high Gateway Arch on the Mississippi riverfront in St. Louis, though not constructed until the 1960s, received a great deal of publicity in 1948, when it won the Jefferson Westward Expansion Memorial national competition. The acclaimed architect Matthew Nowicki decided in 1949 to use two gigantic parabolic arches to support the roof of the North Carolina State Fair stadium. The sheet-metal arches at McDonald's--fabricated whole and tied to the walls, with the roof built around them--might be smaller than their illustrious predecessors, but they would partake of the same buoyant spirit--a feeling of skyward momentum, symbolic of an aerospace age in which man could hurtle himself into the heavens.

The propagators of structurally adventurous modern design--such architects and engineers as Freyssinet, Le Corbusier, and Pier Luigi Nervi, of Italy--had wanted to span great distances without obstructions or to explore new technologies or to enclose a maximum volume of space with a minimum of material. The restaurant industry felt free to ignore these considerations. What mattered was the futuristic look. Richard McDonald, in injecting the appearance of dynamic structural modernism into a roadside hamburger stand, wasn't bothered that the arches, as they were finally built, had no function other than the strictly visual. He said later that it was probably fortunate the arches were not structural, since if a vehicle had run into one of them, it might have done serious damage to the building.

The McDonald brothers considered painting the arches red but, according to Richard McDonald, they chose yellow because it offered contrast with the red and white of the walls. Attached to each arch was neon tubing in white and reddish-pink, a color combination that, Richard McDonald believed, "gave the entire building a pleasant glow at night." In the fifties architects began to equate neon with commercial vulgarity, but the public as a whole had not yet turned against it. After the austerities of the Depression and the scarcities of the war years, an explosion of light and color was more cheery than irritating. The arches, incidentally, were occasionally called "golden arches" by the McDonald brothers, but the term didn't become widely known for several years, perhaps because they were golden only during the day. When restaurant magazines searched for a way to describe the building, they usually referred instead to "rainbow-shaped arches illuminated with neon," which, at McDonald's locations in the West, insistently flashed on and off in the night. The pink and white of the neon in the arches were repeated in a sign near the street--a single arch with a little chef, "Speedee," who had what was referred to as a round hamburger face.

The first of what came to be called "candy-striped" buildings was a franchised unit that opened in Phoenix, Arizona, in May of 1953. A second franchised McDonald's, also conforming to the design, opened in August, 1953, in the Los Angeles suburb of Downey. The McDonald brothers granted additional franchises in Los Angeles, Sacramento, Alhambra, Azusa, and other California communities. A system of standardized, eye-catching buildings was well into development when, in 1954, the McDonalds were visited by Ray A. Kroc, a Chicago distributor of milk-shake mixers who had heard of the brothers' phenomenal business.

Though Kroc arrived after thousands of other people had already discovered the McDonalds, timing worked to his advantage. The McDonalds wanted to avoid the travel that a franchising program required, and illness had recently forced their first franchise agent, William Tansey, to resign after working less than three months. So Kroc became the McDonald brothers' second franchise agent, with rights to license outlets throughout the United States. He accepted the building essentially as the McDonald brothers had commissioned it, adding only such elements as a basement and built-in benches along the side windows (the benches were tiled so that they could be hosed down easily) when he erected the first McDonald's of his own, in Des Plaines, Illinois, in 1955--the same year the McDonald brothers demolished the octagonal restaurant in San

Bernardino and replaced it with a standardized building. About 1959 Kroc began fitting the arches with fluorescent bulbs and yellow plastic covers, not only making them more sturdy than neon tubes but also producing a consistent color--bright yellow, day or night. Advertising began to urge: "Look for the Golden Arches."

In 1961 Kroc bought out the McDonald brothers for \$2.7 million. Even after doing so he clung to the basic elements of the design they had conceived in 1952.

THE EXTRAORDINARY SUCCESS OF MCDONALD'S made it a model and gave it an enormous impact on the character of the restaurant business and of the man-made environment. Entrepreneurs throughout the United States launched competing chains with similar formulas--walk-up windows, low prices, limited menus, simple cooking procedures that could be easily taught to inexperienced, low-paid workers, and an absence of carhops and indoor seating. Many of them copied either the specifics or the spirit of the McDonald's building.

The basic shape of the structure--leaning forward, as if poised to leap toward the highway--was what some chains mimicked. In 1954 the Bresler Ice Cream Company, of Chicago, started a chain of self-service hamburger outlets named Henry's, in honor of the Bresler brother who had died the previous year. By 1958 Henry's Hamburgers had adopted the tilted roof, the thick, tapered soffit, and the horizontal bands of tile used by McDonald's. Henry's had no arches, but the Breslers did erect a metal sign framework that was made to appear as if it had burst through the center of the roof. In 1956, in Gary, Indiana, the Tastee-Freez Company, of Chicago, built the first outlet of a hamburger chain that the Tastee-Freez chairman, Leo S. Maranz, called Carrols, in honor of his daughter. Customers ordering fifteen-cent hamburgers at Carrols stood outdoors under an extended, sloping roof, as they did at McDonald's and at Henry's. Behind a kitchen exposed by large windows on the front and sides was a boxy rear area for storage and lavatories, the walls decorated with the ever more common red and white stripes--in this instance with the stripes running vertically instead of horizontally. The most striking architectural feature, however, was a pair of big blue boomerangs--"wings" or "fins," the company called them--one attached to each side of the building, as if it were ready to fly into the sky. Here, for the first time, was a major fast-food chain exploiting dynamic modern architectural imagery just as aggressively as McDonald's had.

In 1958, after two years of experimentation, the executives of a restaurant-equipment manufacturing company in Indianapolis started Burger Chef, a chain that at its peak, in the late 1960s, had more than 1,000 outlets. Its standard building, designed by the Indianapolis architect Harry Cooler, and its roadside sign, devised in conjunction with the Grate Sign Company, of Joliet, Illinois, had what the signmaker Tony Grate terms "the kite look." McDonald's "had the arches that added height to their building," Grate says. "We did the same thing, but Burger Chef didn't have the financial capability of McDonald's, so we had to do it cheaply." A vaguely kite-like, or diamond-shaped, framework rose from the floor of the ordering area and extended above the roof. When a thin glass-and-metal storm front was added to the building, the angles were

reproduced in its frame. The angles gave Burger Chef a visual tension, a sense of upward and outward thrust restrained only by the strength of the frame, and the tension made the building more compelling.

Some roadside eating places remained calm exceptions to the rule of ostentation, if only because they hadn't yet invested much money or attention in their exterior images. But as chain operations proliferated, as competition intensified, and as highway traffic gathered speed, the majority of franchisers moved toward highly visible "image buildings," almost of necessity. Bold structural or pseudo-structural elements showed up even in restaurants that had once gotten along without them.

This shift of style was evident at Burger King, a chain founded in Florida in 1953. In 1952 Matthew Burns, of Long Beach, California, had invited his stepson, Keith G. Cramer--the owner of Keith's Drive-in, a carhop operation in Daytona Beach, Florida--to fly to California and witness the enormous success of the McDonald brothers' self-service drive-in. Cramer accepted the invitation and then joined with his stepfather to acquire the right to use the newly invented Insta automatic broiler, which could cook as many as 400 hamburgers an hour, expelling patties into a receiving pan of warm sauce and depositing toasted buns in a separate pan. Cramer and Burns went to Jacksonville and in the summer of 1953 built the first Burger King, a self-service drive-in on Beach Boulevard.

"When we came to Jacksonville," Cramer recalls, "there were a lot of sign restrictions by the city. We just made the sign an integral part of the building to get around the restrictions." This was not, of course, an unusual advertising technique. A variety of businesses across the country, including A&W Root Beer, had already achieved the same integration of sign and structure with a rectangular pylon growing out of a rectangular building. Burger King's pylon tapered, growing wider as it rose through the slightly slanted roof. Emblazoned on it was the company's advertising-BURGERS, SHAKES, and a circle nearly five feet tall around the price, 18 cents. Within a year Cramer and Burns built a second unit, on Main Street in Jacksonville. There the top of the pylon carried a sign bearing the company's new symbol, a king sitting on a hamburger and holding a milk shake. Similar designs were adopted by other Burger King units, which were rapidly opened by Cramer and Burns in northern Florida and by franchisees in other regions.

To Cramer and Burns, who had formulated their plans while looking at the original McDonald's in San Bernardino, not at its exuberant arched successor, this seemed good enough. But in Miami, David R. Edgerton, Jr., one of the earliest owners of a Burger King franchise, became dissatisfied. The expense of reinforcing the pylon well enough to satisfy South Florida's hurricane-resistance standards, along with the refusal of some municipalities to allow a business to erect both a roadside sign and an advertising pylon, gave Edgerton an excuse to do away with the pylon and introduce elements much more graphic. In 1957 Edgerton erected a large sign at the front of a new Burger King's property, eliminated the pylon, and installed on the rooftop the chain's first pair of garish metal "handlebars."

Had metal elements like these handlebars appeared on top of a large building designed by a modern architect, they undoubtedly would have been structural, helping to hold the building together. Burger King, occupying a concrete-block building of little more than 500 square feet, had no need for out-of-the-ordinary structural support, but it did need a strong, memorable image, and this the company achieved by putting the two angular appendages on the roof and painting them red. Like McDonald's, Carrols, and Burger Chef, Burger King realized that architectural modernism--the kind of modernism that glorified exotic engineering techniques--could be exploited for its advertising potential. Edgerton and his partner, James W. McLamore, installed glowing red neon on the handlebars, later replacing the neon with backlighted red plastic. In 1961 Edgerton and McLamore acquired national franchise rights to the company, then active primarily in Florida and a few other parts of the Southeast, and they began putting hamburger stands with radiant rooftop appendages along highways throughout America.

Most architects would have disapproved of this penchant for treating modernism as a cosmetic device--it was a matter of form faking function. Nonetheless, flamboyant restaurants did constitute a tribute to the remarkable acceptance that a gymnastic brand of modernism had achieved. Fast-food businesses would have found other ways to make their buildings stand out if the public mood had been unreceptive to this kind of architectural statement. The fifties was a time for brashness at most levels of design. Certainly, those who set the tone for serious discussion within the architectural profession indulged in their own celebration of the bold and bright. The same year that Burger King raised its red handlebars, *Progressive Architecture* approvingly featured a motel that the magazine said was "planned with the conviction that a colorful, well-illuminated building is worth more than any sign!"

The roadsides on the outskirts of America's cities grew ever more gaudy, with screaming signs (BURGERS! SHAKES!), blinking lights, and irregularly shaped buildings. In 1958 eating places in the United States made annual sales totaling \$11 billion, up 59 percent from a decade earlier. Refreshment stands and carhop-service drive-ins flourished at the same time that fast food was becoming commonplace. From 1950 to 1961 the number of Dairy Queen stands jumped from 1,400 to 3,400. A&W Root Beer drive-ins more than quadrupled in number, from 450 to 2,000. The burgeoning number of eating places competed visually with vaulted-roof bowling alleys, car washes with spiky structural projections, motels with outward-leaning facades, and other equally insistent commercial buildings.

BY THE BEGINNING OF THE 1960S, HOWEVER, THE PROFUSION of clashing modern forms had started to incur a public backlash. In January, 1961, the prominent conservative political philosopher Russell Kirk told the nation's architects that "we have done more damage to our country's artificial and natural beauty since the Second World War than we were able to accomplish in the hundred years preceding." One of the nation's leading town planners, Catharine Bauer Wurster, complained of "arbitrary forms and fascinating surfaces, competing for novelty," and warned, "their effect on less able designers and the commercial vernacular is horrible to contemplate." The jurors for *Progressive Architecture's* 1961 design awards worried whether the



architectural profession had descended into chaos. Indeed, the magazine's editors sensed so profound an uneasiness that they began soliciting the thinking of fifty leading architects on where architecture was going and where the field ought to be headed.

Aggressive experimentation with modern forms persisted in some quarters, but the buoyancy of a few years earlier began to dissipate. Flamboyant structural modernism no longer symbolized unquestionably beneficial new possibilities. This change of attitude stemmed partly from architectural considerations: the bold structures had been around long enough, and become common enough, to be judged more coolly now.

In addition, the country simply was not quite in the same mood by the early 1960s. The election of President Kennedy indicated a degree of dissatisfaction with existing conditions. Concern about the country's faults and inequities manifested itself in new forms of social criticism and political action. Architecture--particularly popular architecture--responds to shifts in the emotional climate, and in the early 1960s it became evident that designs imbued with a brash futurism no longer fit as well as they had. Restaurants started drifting to other kinds of images--strong, immediately recognizable images, but less technological, less like the hardware of tomorrow.

The transformation was most noticeable at first in coffee shops--establishments that offered full menus and relatively quick service at counters and at tables or booths, often twenty-four hours a day. In the 1950s southern California had spawned what came to be known as the California coffee Shop--a restaurant whose dramatic roof, hovering above the glass walls of the dining area, called out to motorists on freeways and commercial strips. A Los Angeles architectural firm, Arm6t & Davis, became the acknowledged master of the California coffee-shop style, creating bold forms and bright interiors for chains like Denny's and Big Boy, first in California and then, as these organizations expanded, throughout the nation.

Thomas Wells, an architect in Honolulu, helped bring to an end such brash coffee-shop design. Wells designed restaurants but refused to produce anything in the customary California style--"weird plaster shapes meaning absolutely nothing," as he puts it. To Wells the aggressively conspicuous coffee shops of a chain like Denny's represented "just a cheap Las Vegas approach to architecture," an attitude of "anything goes."

In 1964 a California restaurant executive, John McIntosh, asked Wells to design a coffee shop--eventually called Coco's--that would serve hamburgers, malts, and a few other uncomplicated items, but that would maintain noticeably higher quality than its competitors did. For the first of the new coffee shops, Wells designed a dining room that had leather-like upholstered booths under a wood and cork ceiling, with indirect lighting. Wood columns framed the windows, which came together at the corners, with mitered glass. The floor of the entrance and the counter area was covered in squares of textured brown tile. The dining room had earth-tone carpeting instead of the terrazzo floors found in most coffee shops. Because there was nothing to obstruct the view, the dining room felt spacious yet also calm. Wells introduced a sense of harmony with the

surrounding environment. He bermed the earth up to the bottom of the big windows and gave the building broad overhangs. The roof rose at a gentle, even pitch, then curved upward at the top, hiding the air-handling equipment in a center roof well. The restaurant opened in January, 1966. In May a second Coco's designed by Wells opened in Scottsdale, Arizona. Coco's would ultimately grow into a chain of more than 200 coffee shops distinguished by a soft, somewhat residential flavor.

Wells's work had a major impact on other chains and other architects, particularly on Robert Colwell and Larry Ray, two architects who quit Arm6t & Davis in 1962 to start their own firm. In 1964 Colwell & Ray moved from Los Angeles to Orange County, not far from the site of the first Coco's. Ray, the firm's principal designer, often produced coffee shops in a style similar to Arm6t & Davis's, with whipped-up interiors of hot pink and orange and with emphatic roofs covered by colored stripes of gravel. This was the style embraced by the majority of coffee-shop owners at the time, including the firm's most important client, Harold Butler, who developed Denny's into a publicly traded company, with coffee shops from coast to coast.

But Ray had qualms about such a flashy approach. In 1967, emboldened by the successful example of Coco's, Ray and Colwell developed a design for a more composed, restrained, "neighborhood Denny's" and presented it to Butler, hoping he'd buy it and build it. According to Ray, Butler's initial reaction was We're not in that kind of business, but the architects kept after him until eventually he agreed to give the new design a try.

Inside the experimental Denny's were wood beams, wood trim, a working fireplace, tables whose plastic laminate tops were decorated in wood patterns, and a floor that was carpeted rather than surfaced in terrazzo. Outside, the walls were covered with oversized reddish-brown bricks.

The roof of charcoal-gray barrel tiles had deep overhangs, and it rose gently from all four sides, like a low pyramid that had been truncated at the top. It climbed just high enough for the air-handling equipment to sit out of sight in a center roof well. A rough-sawn fascia board rising from the edges of the roof well would provide a natural-looking backing for a Denny's sign, if a sign were wanted. The company called the new style of building its Intowner model and initially used it where more flamboyant Denny's designs would have run into community resistance. In a few years the Intowner and models like it would become a major part of the Denny's operation.

Even the king of coffee-shop architecture, Arm6t & Davis, began edging away from boisterous buildings with free-flowing roofs. In 1968 the firm produced an enlarged version of a California ranch house for Bob's Big Boy restaurants. It featured a regular pitched roof of clay tile and exterior walls surfaced in small beige blocks of slump-stone--a plump-sided southwestern building product made of concrete, intended to resemble blocks of adobe. The ceiling was of wood with exposed beams, and the floors were covered with a mixture of quarry tile and carpeting. This design--adopted with modifications by JB's, Elby's, and other members of the far-flung Big Boy network--brought Armet & Davis into the realm of residential imagery, though its work didn't

become entirely sedate. Several versions of the design included a tall gable-wall of glass, and the interiors retained some of the cheery energy of the earlier Big Boys.

The influence of Coco's continued to penetrate the restaurant industry. Tom Wells, looking at the changed landscape in the 1980s, jokes, "I feel like I designed the whole country." Wells is correct in believing that the success of Coco's helped the softer coffee-shop aesthetic blossom throughout the nation; restaurant owners pay attention to designs associated with profits. But the critical factor was that Wells captured the emerging spirit of the times. In the 1960s the public's mood was shifting, and Wells offered-in an attractive way--the subdued sensibility that people were increasingly inclined to embrace.

THE SHIFT IN image and atmosphere appeared not only in the coffee-shop segment of the industry but also in fast-food restaurants, whose flamboyant 1950s-style designs were running up against increasing community resistance. Some municipalities objected to McDonald's, for example, because of the golden arches bursting through the roof. Even within the McDonald's company Ray Kroc heard complaints that the slant-roofed, arched buildings were eyesores, and he couldn't help noticing that some of his competitors, attempting to gain wider acceptance, were moving to make their buildings less garish. In 1967 Burger King took the red handlebars off its roof. A year later Carrols adopted a new prototype with a fiat roof and no boomerang appendages. In April of 1968 Ray Kroc hired Don E. Miller as the McDonald's organization's chief architect. Miller, who had designed truck-and-tractor sales and service centers, was given the job of creating a new McDonald's prototype, one that would have an indoor dining area and would be acceptable to cities and towns throughout the United States.

Miller developed four alternatives to the arched building and laid his sketches on the desk in Kroc's office for President Fred Turner and Chairman Kroc to review. They examined them, and then, Miller recalls, Kroc slapped the desk: " 'That's what I want. When can we have the drawings?' It hit him right away." The understanding within the company's upper echelon, according to Miller, had been that "they had to use brick on the walls, they had to dress their building up to fit the community." In many municipalities, he says, "it was the only way you could pull building permits and obtain zoning."

The new McDonald's, introduced in January of 1969, in the Chicago suburb of Matteson, had its plate-glass windows set into walls covered with a soothing mixture of beige and brown brick. The main portion of the building was thirty-four feet wide, with a fourteen-foot extension on one side to seat about sixty customers. The days of the walk-up window were gone forever. Above the walls was a weighty, overhanging roof that seemed to pull the building toward the earth rather than propel it upward and outward, as the earlier wedge roof had done. No longer were there arches on the roof; these were now reserved for a new, double-arched sign, placed elsewhere on the premises. The double-hip parapet roof, as it was referred to by some, or double mansard, as Miller called it, was surfaced in slate for a more dignified appearance. The roof, illuminated by metal ribs, sloped at a 30-degree angle along the perimeter and then rose at a

60-degree angle to form a parapet, which hid the heating, ventilating, and air-conditioning equipment that had sat exposed on the roofs of earlier McDonald's outlets. The roof gave the building a relatively calm, horizontal profile, a feeling of shelter on a lower and more human scale.

The general configuration of the new McDonald's roof became virtually standard for fast-food architecture. Dunkin' Donuts adopted a "mansard" of brown metal with built-in signs. Burger King, having first employed a mansard painted bright red, decided in 1972 to cover the mansard in cedar shingles in natural shades. The only remaining red would be an illuminated plastic light-band above the mansard. Wood now trimmed Burger King's windows, and brick covered those portions of the exterior not devoted to wood or glass.

By the mid-1970s there had been a nearly complete transformation in the complexion of fast-food buildings. Der Wienerschnitzel, a California chain whose restaurants were housed within bright orange A-frames, shifted to a softer shade of orange for the roofs and then discontinued orange roofs entirely. The company had Colwell & Ray design a new building with a flat-topped brown roof and walls of dark brown wood or ivory-colored stucco. In 1977 Kentucky Fried Chicken, rebounding from a period of lax management, belatedly introduced a new prototype with tan walls and a terra-cotta-colored mansard. Above the mansard was a small red-and-white-striped pyramid--a vestige of the red and white stripes that in the 1960s had been used on top of the entire building. Red Barn introduced a lower, mansard-topped building with brownish-red brick walls. Older Red Barns turned into brown barns and beige barns.

One of the best-selling books of 1970, written by Charles A. Reich, heralded the rise of a new form of consciousness; "the greening of America" was the catchy phrase Reich coined for the book's title. In the realm of commercial buildings what actually occurred was the browning of America. Earth tones became the national colors.

The newly muted color schemes seemed mandatory in an era when millions of people exhibited an intense concern over degradation of the environment. Restaurant chains felt compelled to adopt softer colors. They also decided that it would be prudent to put lawns, shrubbery, and trees on portions of their properties that had until now been occupied by pavement and trash receptacles. The thoroughness of the landscaping varied in accordance with local requirements, the degree of community resistance to fast-food outlets, the physical and socioeconomic character of the surrounding area, and, to some extent, the clientele.

Of course, fast-food restaurants kept nature on a tight leash. Specialists recommended such plants as Chinese junipers, which stayed close to the ground. Few managers planted trees capable of overshadowing their restaurants. A policy of planting on a diminutive scale made sense from the standpoint of keeping maintenance chores minimal and of keeping the restaurant and its signs in plain view. It also created an aura of orderliness--an impression that served fast-food restaurants well.

WHILE CHANGES LIKE THESE WERE TAKING PLACE on restaurant exteriors, another form of evolution was proceeding inside. Initially the fast-food industry had single-mindedly pursued a goal of delivering food as fast and efficiently as possible. Customers at McDonald's--standing outside on concrete that had been painted green to seem cooler--observed a counter and a kitchen outfitted in sparkling stainless steel and watched the quickness of a kitchen crew made up in the Kroc years primarily of clean-cut boys who didn't keep their jobs long but who nonetheless gave an impression of being organized and purposeful. Well into the 1960s Kroc was advising franchisees not to hire girls, because they attracted boyfriends, whose presence, he believed, distracted the girls from their work. Indeed, any social contact beyond a cheerful greeting and a cheerful farewell was viewed by Kroc and others in negative terms, as an impediment to maximum turnover. In 1962 American Restaurant magazine changed its name to American Restaurant Hospitality and stopped publishing articles about fast-food companies--the implication being that hospitality was one quality the fast-food outlets lacked. Companies like McDonald's and Burger King were geared to efficient feeding, not graciousness.

Ray Kroc had always been leery of making his outlets too comfortable. He wanted to attract people, but he didn't want them to stay for more than a few minutes. He was proud to have prohibited such public services as newspaper boxes and telephone booths, to have banned such entertainment as pinball and jukeboxes, to have done without candy and cigarette machines. To a large extent his policies were aimed at combating his most enthusiastic yet dreaded customer--the American teenager. Kroc wanted the teenage trade, but he hoped to keep the transactions quick and limited. The objective was to prevent adolescents and others from turning his restaurants into social institutions, as opposed to mere feeding stations. Kroc's attempts to eliminate social contact at McDonald's fell short of their mark. Teenagers were resilient, and would frequent McDonald's despite a paucity of comforts and services other than inexpensive food and clean lavatories. They regarded McDonald's as a hangout, Kroc's intentions notwithstanding. In the 1960s it was common knowledge that boisterous gatherings of the young had harmed some drive-ins financially, including some McDonald's outlets. McDonald's had a reason for making its design and furnishings relatively antisocial.

Gradually, however, McDonald's and other chains had to improve the atmosphere and comforts they offered. In the mid-1960s the spectacle of teenagers cruising the drive-in and fast-food circuit, revving engines, screeching tires, and sometimes drinking and getting into fights incited a growing reaction from municipal governments. Some chain restaurants stood at expressway interchanges or in business and industrial areas, but many were close to residential neighborhoods, which fought back when their peace was disturbed. Public resentment of restaurants where teenagers congregated grew so intense that one of the magazines serving the drive-in industry published a roundup every month of ordinances aimed at outdoor eating places.

Moving the eating indoors was one way to discourage rowdiness in the parking lots and to ward off tough municipal restrictions on restaurant operations, including how

late the restaurants could stay open. In addition, the desire of adult customers for a greater level of comfort pushed the chains toward modifying their buildings.

A continual upgrading of interiors took place during the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, generally increasing the level of comfort, but with some notable differences from one chain to another. Kentucky Fried Chicken's "new image" prototype of 1977 featured hanging plants, decorative woodwork, earth-tone vinyl floors, wooden tables and chairs, booths with padded seats and cushioned backs, and a combination of recessed and ornamental lights. Now, it seemed, customers had to be given moderately pleasant surroundings in which to eat; the objective of most chains was to develop a dining area that would be agreeable for a brief duration without requiring a great deal of maintenance. Sitting down at a typical McDonald's, customers felt immediate relief in the cushioning of the seat backs. A few minutes later, however, they became restless because the seat bottom consisted of hard, uncushioned plastic. Tables and chairs presented a neat appearance, all lined up in uniform rows, but the order was achieved by permanently anchoring the tables to the floor and attaching the seats to the table bases. The customer was denied the possibility of making the minor adjustments that do much to determine whether a person will feel in control of his surroundings. Wendy's, from early on, provided small tables accompanied by what David Thomas, the chain's founder, has referred to as "four not particularly comfortable chairs." What the fast-food industry learned is summarized by Dunkin' Donuts' chief architect, Abraham J. Goldberg: "You have to give comfort, but it's measured comfort."

Nearly every chain introduced softer interior tones and textures as the 1970s progressed. Wendy's put carpeting on the floor. A Hardee's prototype designed in 1975 by a New York marketing, communications, and design firm, Lippincott & Margulies, featured an ordering-area counter surfaced in three-inch-thick maple butcher block. Trash receptacles, once so conspicuous, took on colors, materials, and shapes enabling them to merge quietly into the decor. Dining areas were placed away from the commotion of the ordering areas.

Overall, fast-food interiors had advanced significantly from the rudimentary designs of a few years earlier. The Hardee's 1975 prototype introduced a "cozy corner"--a windowless area removed from the main flow of restaurant traffic, to create a greater sense of privacy. Of the major fast-food chains, Burger King created probably the most pleasant atmosphere from an adult point of view. Not only were the interiors given to earth tones and plants but they often had comfortable booths along the perimeter, where people could sit without feeling pressured to be on their way. In one of the fastest-paced areas of Manhattan--Lexington Avenue just two blocks north of Grand Central Station--customers at a Burger King outlet could be seen sitting next to the windows in midmorning, reading books, an activity that would have been anathema to any fast-food chain in the 1960s.

Many restaurants began to make a more sophisticated use of light. The bright, exposed fluorescent lighting inside Dunkin' Donuts units evolved at Goldberg's direction into skillfully recessed fixtures that cast light around the perimeter of the building and

onto the food displays but not on the customers. In the mid-1970s, dinner-house chains began to abandon their lone-candle-in-the-darkness atmosphere and let natural and artificial light penetrate the dimness of their dining rooms. Skylights popped through ceilings, and greenhouse dining-room appendages were added to outer walls. These features quickly gained acceptance at all levels of the restaurant industry, so that by the early 1980s fast-food chains like McDonald's and Wendy's were outfitting some of their dining areas with skylights or greenhouse extensions. Many of these skylights were false, consisting of tilted translucent panels with bulbs behind them (in accordance with the chains' insistence on keeping maintenance to a minimum), but they nonetheless enabled restaurants to give the impression of letting the sun shine in. Greenhouses and skylights also seemed to be harmonious settings for plants, which had already become an established part of interior decoration. The result was that interiors, despite their brightness, retained a soft, natural feeling.

IN THE RESTAURANT INDUSTRY ONE OF THE RECURRENT issues that designers and executives have grappled with is how to change the buildings of an established company in such a way that they remain up-to-date, yet avoid abandoning too many of the characteristics that customers have come to expect. In searching for an effective image companies or their advisers have often asked the public for its thoughts, typically by surveying a representative sampling of intended customers. By the 1980s consumer research, long used by advertisers and merchandisers, had come into full flower within the fast-food industry.

Some companies, including McDonald's, were equipped with in-house research departments capable of measuring national response to designs, but other chains relied on firms like Lippincott & Margulies. Such outside consultants, with their elaborate research techniques, were needed by chains that had grown too large for their executives to observe a cross-section of customers. Multi-million-dollar companies, many of which were now operating as subsidiaries of Fortune 500 firms, couldn't get by on instinct.

Consider the case of Taco Bell. By 1982 Taco Bell had 1,500 restaurants in forty-seven states and five foreign countries. The chain, owned by the conglomerate Pepsico, was intent on moving into regions that were unfamiliar with both Taco Bell and Mexican food. But the company's executives, in Irvine, California, wanted to reduce the risk of an embarrassing failure. Consequently, Taco Bell commissioned S&O Consultants, of San Francisco, to study the restaurant's image and design, and to propose changes.

An S&O subsidiary, Nova Research Group, questioned a total of 500 fast-food consumers in three metropolitan areas where Taco Bell was well established and in two areas that Taco Bell had just entered. The questions focused on people's feelings about Mexican food in general and Taco Bell in particular. Participants looked at slides of Taco Bell buildings and signs, and chose descriptions from pairs of contrasting adjectives--clean or dirty, family-oriented or adult, expensive or not expensive, and so on. Three hundred Taco Bell customers took part in "visibility studies," watching scenes that, through the use of a device called a tachistoscope, were flashed for a measured, brief

duration: a fortieth of a second, a fifth of a second, three fifths of a second, and a full second. "What did you see?" the participants were asked. The tests showed that people recognized McDonald's golden arches and Kentucky Fried Chicken's bucket at faster exposures than those at which they recognized the Taco Bell sign. The Taco Bell sign was, in researchers' parlance, "not impactful." After the views had been flashed on and off and participants had been asked to identify the views, they were shown a series of views for an extended period--views of the free-standing sign, the bell tower, the small bell in the tower, the arched windows, the red tile roof. They were asked to indicate whether they liked or disliked each of those elements.

The research showed that Taco Bell ran a risk of rejection in trying to promote Mexican food to a non-Mexican population, especially in regions where Mexican food was uncommon. The exotic often meets resistance; for just this reason Lippincott & Margulies had advised Pizza Hut in the mid-1970s to remove a little Italian character from its building and sign. Pizza Hut had to be "Americanized." Similarly, S&O's research showed that many people distrusted Mexican restaurants, fearing that they would be dirty. Something would have to be done about Taco Bell's strong Mexican associations.

The surveys showed that people liked most of the Taco Bell building features, especially the arched windows and the red tile roof, but the sign was another matter--36 percent disliked it, whereas just three percent disliked the arched windows. In tests like these, consumers generally try to say pleasant things about what they're shown. The 36 percent negative rating for the sign signaled outright repudiation. On every measure the sign fared badly. Besides arousing dislike and falling short of instant recognition, it was confusing; many people didn't know that the sign was meant to portray a Mexican sleeping under his sombrero, on top of a bell. And if they had known, would they have been reassured by a profile of a sleeping Mexican?

One result of S&O's work was a clarification of Taco Bell's strategy for attracting customers. The company was not about to change its name or drop the Mexican foods that had accounted for its success, but it began to play down Mexican associations. People at the company's headquarters began describing Taco Bell as "a fast-food restaurant that serves Mexican food," rather than as a Mexican restaurant. They were intent on securing Taco Bell a place in the American mainstream. On some existing restaurants a bell logo, manufactured in plastic, was placed where the restaurants in earlier years had displayed a real bell in a real aperture at the top of the wall. Eliminated along with the bell tower were heavy wooden outriggers that had projected outward from the walls, in a manner characteristic of Mexican architecture. The color of the exterior walls--"dirty brown," in S&O's judgment--was lightened. The two most popular features--the tile roof and the arched windows--were incorporated into the design of a new Taco Bell prototype, but S&O advised against letting them seem too authentically Mexican. Instead of covering a long roof pitch, the tiles formed a simple mansard--a short slope above all four walls. This was a roof shape already strongly associated with fast-food and other obviously American retail buildings, so it helped play down Taco Bell's ethnic image. No bell tower rose from the roof of the new building--which the



company referred to as its Mainstream Mansard design. The building adopted a dignified, symmetrical facade with front and side entrances that projected slightly forward, their arched peaks echoing the arches of the doorways. On the front of the new prototype the windows were arched and trimmed in brick, but S&O was fearful of featuring the arches too strongly; on the sides the building used large rectangular windows, which looked unquestionably modern rather than Mexican. Above the doorway "Taco Bell" was written in discreet brown letters, accompanied by the bell logo in plastic.

There was irony in Taco Bell's embracing plastic at the very time when other fast-food chains were trying to de-emphasize their "plastic look" and achieve a more natural and authentic appearance. But Taco Bell, like untold numbers of second-generation ethnic Americans, saw foreignness as a troublesome label, and the company grasped at established symbols of American retailing. Plastic was one of them.

THE GROWING use of consultants like S&O and of designs based on consumer research has eliminated some of the amateurishness (and spontaneity) from roadside enterprises, paring the buildings and signs down to little more than their selling essentials. Standardized-image chain restaurants have historically tried to minimize offbeat personal expression, but consumer testing has made quirky, individualistic designs all the less prevalent. Thousands of small business operators are now part of franchise networks that receive guidance from marketing, communications, and design firms.

As a consequence, the appearance of the American roadside is more heavily influenced by national and international companies than ever before. Supervision by these enterprises has resulted in visual clashes of the same architectural imagery and logos in communities all across the country. It is as if commercial strips were jousting fields on which the thrusts and jabs of corporate combat are replayed again and again. The combatants never vary, only their order of appearance.

The visual contentiousness of much of America's commercial surroundings springs not only from architects and consultants eager to oblige their clients but also from more fundamental sources--Americans' ceaseless travel and migration throughout their country, the competitive nature of the economy, the profusion of building materials and construction technologies, and, perhaps most important, a love of convenience. Wherever a popular insistence on convenience and economy is combined with minimal local attention to the shaping of the environment, it is unlikely that ordinary commercial buildings such as chain restaurants will reflect a richer notion of what America's cities, suburbs, and towns could be.

Indeed, the meager attention usually paid to the visual character of a community's commercial surroundings has made it possible for some chains to boast about their varied designs even when the modifications have been disappointingly minimal. McDonald's introduced sixteen stock facade alternatives--from Country French to Village Depot--that it has applied like wallpaper to the exteriors of some of its standard buildings. These may enable the chain to overcome the protests of local people

untrained in design, but they do not represent a conscientious response to a community's yearning for genuine character.

It is clear that restaurant chains have thoroughly mastered the practical aspects of design and organization. The question is whether having dealt successfully with the nuts-and-bolts issues of efficiency, economy, and convenience--these restaurants can accomplish something greater. There have been times in the past when competing private economic interests came together to create business districts that were both convenient and culturally satisfying, both varied and coherent. And there are places today where chain enterprises have been integrated into harmonious community design. In some cities and towns chains have been required to use existing buildings possessing historical significance or to adopt an architectural form compatible with neighboring structures. In southern California, where the fast-food industry had its origins, more than three decades ago, chains in some areas are now required to use the same materials, colors, and shapes as those of nearby shopping centers, so that there will be a feeling of consistency in what would otherwise be a chaotic strip development.

Most such efforts have resulted in a more muted road-scape, but there is no reason why a newly developed strip could not exude an exuberant personality, its buildings outlined at night in a burst of color. This is not so far-fetched a municipal objective as it may seem. At least one older city, Buffalo, New York, has already acted to install bands of neon on most of the commercial buildings in a district containing many restaurants and bars. Some commercial strips ought to exhibit an air of celebration, especially after dark. Unless there is organized local coordination, however, the strip typically tends to develop neither an unreservedly energetic spirit nor a soothing character.

It is unrealistic to expect individual chain restaurants to serve as architectural centerpieces, but it is within their power to take cues from their neighbors and from local preferences or traditions. The issue is whether restaurant chains--now that they have become, in effect, some of America's most influential urban and suburban designers--can be roused to enhance everyday surroundings not only for a few locales but for much of the nation.

In the end it comes down to whether the public is willing to invest a substantial effort in prodding, inspiring, and sometimes forcing restaurant chains to take their social responsibilities seriously. As of now, the most encouraging thing that can be said is that the evolution of chain-restaurant design has not yet reached its conclusion.

Langdon, Philip. "'Burgers! Shakes!' How the evolving architecture of fast-food chains has shaped the character of America's roadside landscape." *The Atlantic* Dec. 1985: 74+. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 26 Nov. 2012.

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