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**American
Consumer Society
1865-2005
From Hearth to HDTV**



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CHAPTER SEVEN

Destination Suburbia

The 1947 film *Miracle on 34th Street*, a poignant story about a little girl who didn't believe in Santa Claus, is a perennial Christmas favorite on cable TV. The film tells the story of nine-year-old Susan Walker, whose mother Doris works as the public-relations director for R. H. Macy & Company's flagship store in New York City. This divorced working mom has raised her daughter to be skeptical of Santa's promises to provide for her material well-being. The story pivots on the realization that the hired Macy's Santa is the real Kris Kringle who lives in the North Pole. In the end, Susan tells Santa that she wants to live in a house rather than a small New York apartment. The girl gets her wish when her mother marries Fred Galley, the lawyer next door, and the family moves into a modest house in the suburbs.

Miracle on 34th Street showcases important themes in the postwar consumer culture: the department store as a major commercial destination, suburbia as the ideal place to live, and shopping as the means to wish fulfillment. When *Miracle* ran in theaters, the nation had endured the Great Depression, World War II, the reconversion to the civilian economy, which brought skyrocketing prices. During the war, department stores like Macy's had prospered, providing a glimpse of the good life to consumers tired of rationing, recycling, and worn-out cars and appliances. A small family like the Walkers had to live on a budget, accustomed to want. Their remarkable postwar transformation—from skeptics to believers, frugal to free-wheel-

ing, apartment dwellers to suburbanites—epitomized the hopes of countless consumers. The Modern ambition had been to democratize consumption, but troubles had derailed that agenda. In the late 1940s and 1950s, "normalcy" resumed in fits and starts, ultimately achieving the comfort and convenience revolution ignited in Victorian and Modern times.

America Moves from City to Suburb

In the postwar decade, suburbia—developments on the outskirts of large cities or towns—became the principal site of American consumption, the place where the majority of young families lived, worked, played, and shopped. Earlier flights from the inner city outward paled by comparison to the post-World War II migration, and the Boomer era's love of shopping and driving made Victorian collecting and the Modern auto age look quaint. Between 1946 and 1970, the national output of goods and services quadrupled, and a vast majority of American consumers enjoyed comforts unparalleled anywhere in the world.

Suburbanization owed much to changes in the political economy, buoyed by federal initiatives that put full employment and mass consumption at the center of national growth. Millions of new houses were needed for returning soldiers—nicknamed GI's during the war after their "government issue" uniforms—and their young families. Federal aid to mass consumption came in many forms, but one of the most important was the low-interest government-insured mortgage.

During the twentieth century, financing still presented problems for aspiring homeowners, as mortgages required hefty down payments and rigid payback schedules. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, only 40 percent of householders had owned their homes in 1934. The banking crisis of the Great Depression worsened this situation. Most home loans were short-term balloon mortgages; the borrower needed a large down payment and had to pay back the balance in a lump sum after three to fifteen years. Factory workers, drought-plagued farmers, and white-collar clerks couldn't meet their obligations and tried to renew their mortgages, but the instability of the banking system worked against them. Cash-

strapped lenders called in mortgages when they were due, and borrowers couldn't find new loans, so banks foreclosed on the property. John Steinbeck's 1939 novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, winner of the Pulitzer and Nobel Prizes, portrays the way foreclosures affected ordinary Americans. After drought and dust storms destroy the crops, Tom Joad's family defaults on their mortgage, and the bank repossesses the farm, forcing them to leave Oklahoma for California.

In 1934, the New Deal created the National Housing Act, which encouraged residential construction, promoted housing standards, and laid the foundation for a solid mortgage system. Its Federal Housing Administration (FHA) insured mortgages issued by private institutions, creating a safety net for lenders and buyers. In 1944, the last piece of New Deal legislation, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, popularly known as the "GI Bill of Rights," awarded substantial benefits to World War II combat veterans, who most often came from working-class backgrounds. The Veterans Administration (VA), which oversaw the implementation of the bill, provided returning soldiers with hospital care, living allowances, college tuition, and low-interest FHA mortgages. Similar veterans' benefits were awarded to Korean War veterans beginning in 1952, to Vietnam vets in 1966.

The GI Bill's mortgage provision backed nearly 2.4 million home loans between 1944 and 1952. Eligible veterans received a low-interest, 30-year loan with no down payment. While the VA tended to veterans, the FHA extended its reach to ever more homeowners in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. The FHA and the GI Bill, combined with the more recent liberalization of qualification requirements by private lenders, increased the national home ownership rate to 62 percent in 1960 and to almost 69 percent in 2005.

The sudden availability of mortgages put home ownership—the ultimate symbol of middle-class status—within the grasp of millions. The expansion of consumer credit also fueled the purchase of automobiles and appliances. Between 1941 and 1961, the annual consumer expenditure for housing and automobiles tripled, growing from \$713 to \$2,513 per household. Much, but not all, of this money was spent in the suburbs, where investor-builders like William J. Levitt put up expansive new developments that housed thousands of young families.

"We Got a Piece of the American Dream": Levittown, New York

In early 1947, the construction firm of Levitt & Sons—a family business run by William J. Levitt, his brother Alfred, and father Abraham—broke ground for a suburban development in Nassau County, Long Island. Built on former potato fields, Levittown lay just outside of Hempstead, a commercial center that had branches of major department stores, and Mineola, the county seat. An army air base and several defense plants were close by. Within commuting distance of Manhattan by train and an easy drive to defense jobs, Levittown became a magnet for returning GIs who wanted affordable, family-friendly housing. Before the war, these folks had rented apartments in or near the cities. Levittown provided them with entry into the middle class; home ownership signaled that they were achieving the American dream.

During World War II, William J. Levitt had built emergency housing—tiny, four-room concrete buildings—for defense workers in Norfolk, Virginia, while his brother Alfred had learned speedy construction techniques working for the Navy Seabees. Later, the firm's three Levittowns—one on Long Island, a second north of Philadelphia near a U.S. Steel plant, and a third in Willingboro, New Jersey—and its lesser-known developments used many of the low-cost techniques perfected for defense housing. Created from prefabricated materials, Levitt houses delivered on the assurances of the 1939 World's Fair, where the "Home of Tomorrow" had promised affordable dwellings to nearly everyone. Levitt & Sons, nicknamed the "General Motors of the housing industry" by *Time* in July 1950, was one of the home builders that made the Everyman's House a reality.

Levittown began as a rental community for the families of young veterans, and the first house designs—Cape Cod models—embodied Alfred Levitt's ideas for basic shelter. These 800-square-foot starter homes were modeled after turn-of-the-century bungalows, but the name Cape Cod implied New England and Yankee origins. Each house had four main rooms—a kitchen, a living room, and two bedrooms—plus a full bathroom, kitchen appliances, a paved driveway, and a lawn. The floor plan reduced the standard middle-class home

to a minimalist state. The Cape Cod was a training ground for lower-income people who were just entering the middle class. Levittown's spacious green lawns and curvilinear streets, mandated by the FHA for federally subsidized developments, offered inhabitants a pleasant respite from the pavement and noise of the city.

Levitt & Sons, like other developers, didn't stay landlords for long. When Congress extended rent control — one of President Truman's Fair Deal measures designed to combat postwar inflation — developers divested themselves of rental properties. In 1947, Levitt & Sons put each of its 6,000 Cape Cod houses on the market for \$7,600, targeting buyers who earned up to \$3,750 and qualified for FHA financing under the GI Bill.

That same year, Levitt & Sons launched an ambitious plan to build more owner-occupied homes, using Alfred's designs for the Ranch House. Slightly larger than the Cape Cod, the Ranch had four main rooms — a kitchen, a living room, and two bedrooms — plus a bathroom, and two new features: an attic and a covered carport. The carport, an incipient garage, was a distinctively male space, a corollary to the frilly, feminized domestic interior. Men used these covered areas for their automobile repairs and carpentry projects. Finished in 1951, Levittown had 17,500 four-room houses, seven shopping areas, nine swimming pools, and a community hall.

Levittown was America's most famous blue-collar suburb, but it wasn't the only one. Park Forest, Illinois, and Lakewood, California, housed 30,000 and 80,000 people, respectively. Park Forest combined multifamily structures, duplexes, and single-family homes, arranged in courtyards off curved streets. Just outside Los Angeles, Lakewood was laid out on a grid plan, lined by lots of 50 by 100 feet, each of which held an 1,100-square-foot stucco house. From New Jersey to California, GI Towns appeared where there had once been apple orchards and cattle ranches.

Many residents of these subdivisions were first-time home owners, and very few of them knew how to be suburban. As blue-collar consumers grew comfortable in places like Levittown, many realized that prefabricated Capes and Ranches didn't really fit their lifestyles. Among immigrant groups, the large, welcoming kitchen had always been the center of family life, the hearth and heart of the home. The

family gathered around the kitchen table, sharing news and food. In Levittown's Cape Cods, the living room was the designated center of activity, following the model of the middle-class parlor. By the late 1950s, people began to modify the layouts of their homes, adjusting the standardized floor plans to fit their social needs and aesthetic tastes. People added dens, covered their carports and made them into extra bedrooms, and planted trees and shrubs. The impulse to personalize the prefabricated designs fed a Do-It-Yourself fad, sowing the seeds for Home Depot and Lowe's. The "cookie-cutter suburb" became instead a *zabuta rasa* on which consumers chose to write their own cultural history.

GI Towns weren't the only housing options available after World War II. Before the Civil Rights era, many blacks were prohibited from moving into the new suburbs by the FHA, which, unfortunately, supported racial covenants that banned racially mixed communities. They were forced to stay in urban areas, while a fair number of young blue-collar couples chose to remain in cities all across the nation. In 1950s Baltimore, die-hard city dwellers remained committed to the old ethnic communities that clustered around churches, social clubs, and taverns, arguing that they were more convenient and friendly than the suburbs. Many invested in the old neighborhoods, proudly scrubbing their white marble steps spotless, updating rowhouse facades with Formstone, and renovating basements into "club cellars," the urban equivalent of a den or recreation room. Within greater Baltimore, conflict arose over which lifestyle was superior, and the lawn became either a symbol of success or a point of defiance. In 1973, city dweller Barbara Mikulski lamented to a *Baltimore Sun* reporter: "It became a status thing to get enough money to move 'our the road' to those three inches of grass." Mikulski decided to stay behind. Many urbanites preferred the pavement and declared war on grass, as did the man who in 1968 covered the "yard" in front of his house with green concrete.

For many people, however, the suburbs seemed like an improvement over decrepit urban neighborhoods, depression scarifices, and wartime overcrowding. People didn't have to endure their neighbors' arguments through common walls, sweep the sidewalks and streets because of a lack of city services, or worry about encroaching crime. They relished the higher standard of living, exemplified by the open

air, green grass, and detached houses. One Levitt-home owner, interviewed by historian Barbara M. Kelly in 1988, put it plainly. "The war was over, and we were living in one room in my parents' apartment . . . with two children. . . . Then, Mr. Levitt turned all these little potato farms into Levittown, and we got a piece of the American Dream. . . . It was—at least to us—a Paradise."

Blue-Collar Aesthetics, Appliances, and Automobiles

Today, consumers take the accessories of "better living" for granted: single-family homes, lawns and decks, new cars, and glistening appliances. Postwar Americans saw colorful refrigerators, barbecue grills, and two-toned cars with chrome fins as emblems of the good life—artifacts to be valued much as the Victorians treasured their parlors and china cabinets.

Nothing more famously summarizes America's fascination with these new durable goods than the "kitchen debate" between Vice President Richard M. Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev, which took place at the American National Exhibition in Moscow in July 1959. Two years before, in October 1957, the Russians had launched *Sputnik*, the world's first manmade satellite, and earlier in 1959, had mounted an exhibit of Soviet achievements in New York City. At the apex of the Cold War, the U.S. government was determined not to be outdone. The U.S. Information Agency, the State Department's propaganda arm, mounted a \$5 million display in Moscow, showing the products of 800 companies. The exhibit included "Split-nik," a \$14,000 luxury Ranch House furnished with \$5,000 in the latest high-tech gear, including a built-in clothes washer, a color television, and a Do-It-Yourself workshop. Nixon and Khrushchev toured the show and bantered about the standard of living in their two countries. Nixon boasted that Split-nik, outfitted with electric appliances, demonstrated the superior lifestyle enjoyed by average Americans.

Kitchen appliances were among the most coveted of consumer goods, must-haves for every postwar family's identity kit. In 1930, only 8 percent of U.S. households had refrigerators; by 1960, that number had skyrocketed to 90 percent. Similarly, households with

washing machines increased from 24 to 73 percent, and vacuums, from 30 to 73 percent.

While Nixon and Khrushchev debated living standards, tastemakers and consumers negotiated the *style* of kitchen appliances. Blue-collar Americans new to the middle class craved designs that proved they had arrived. Rather than simply emulate their upscale neighbors, they shopped for appliances that fit *their* ideal definition of what it meant to be successful. They wanted refrigerators, stoves, and kitchen cabinets that looked big, powerful, and flashy. Their purchasing power was so great that it redefined "average" taste.

This "more is better" aesthetic extended to other consumer goods. Whether in Levittown or Baltimore, young families needed furniture, carpets, drapes, swing sets, and a multitude of other items. In home furnishings, the wives of professors, attorneys, and physicians gobbled up imported Danish Modern furniture, which embodied high-style simplicity. But in GI Towns and the old urban neighborhoods, blue-collar consumers preferred Early American furniture, along with linoleum flooring, braided rugs, and frilly café curtains. The names Early American and Colonial not only suggested the values of freedom and patriotism that GIs had defended during the war, but the furniture's bulbous wooden forms and overstuffed cushions delivered the abundance that blue-collar consumers wanted: more bang for the buck.

While women took pride in their appliances, men indulged their consumer desires and demonstrated their prowess with their cars. In January 1959, George Walker, vice president in charge of styling at Ford, elaborated on masculine desires in *Popular Mechanics*. "The American public is aggressive, it's moving upward all the time . . . and that means bigness. When the American workin' man gets a little money he wants a bigger house and he wants a bigger car." Annual automobile purchases increased from 70,000 vehicles in 1945 to 10 million in 1973. Consumers doubled their expenditures on automobiles—loan payments, gasoline, oil, tires, and regular maintenance—to \$60 billion per year, which amounted to about 10 percent of the GNP.

Detroit's design rivalries reached a feverish pitch. With a 94 percent market share, the Big Three automakers—General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler—poured resources into their styling divisions, giving

designers free rein. Auto designers created "dream machines" that fed consumer fantasies of luxury and power. For the populace market, they introduced models with more horsepower, longer wheelbases, and flashier accessories. These designs insulated the driver from the sensations of the newly built interstates, allowing men to imagine themselves as fighter pilots soaring through the wild blue yonder. In pursuit of the American dream, blue-collar car owners coveted all the comforts and accessories that had once been the exclusive prerogative of the rich. The two-tone Chevy with a car radio, glittery upholstery, and wide girth symbolized that a factory worker was successful.

By the 1960s, the automotive market changed again as Baby Boomers came of age and the two-car family emerged. In 1950, only 7 percent of American households owned more than one car. By 1960, the number had grown to 15 percent; by 1970, to 29 percent. While the primary car was an all-purpose vehicle that showed the family's place in the world, the second car fit the needs of the driver. Station wagons, the forerunner to the soccer mom's minivan, were created for suburban mothers to haul children and groceries around.

As the early Boomers matured, Detroit introduced the first vehicles designed around youthful exuberance and rebelliousness. GM's 1964 Pontiac GTO sports coupe imitated the hot rod, a blue-collar favorite since the 1940s. The 1965 Ford Mustang targeted the growing market segment of 16- to 24-year olds, who were young, style-conscious, and had spending money. The car's rugged good looks meshed Western cowboy styles with the populace preference for bold, flashy designs. By the 1960s, blue-collar aesthetics had become synonymous with the mainstream, and manufacturers had to keep up.

Mall Culture

The shopping mall was a new commercial community created around suburbia, climate control, and automobility. Businesses experimented with new types of retail spaces, and the ones that met with public approval became models for further development. The result was the great commercial shift of retailing from the city to the suburbs, and the rise of the regional shopping mall as the new palace of consumption.

In 1950, retailing was still located in the center of the city or town, with smaller commercial strips in outlying neighborhoods. By the time British pop star Petula Clark's "Downtown" was released as a record in the United States in 1965, most Americans had turned their backs on city centers. While a sufficient number of Americans loved downtown enough to make Clark's tune into a Top Forty hit, many shoppers believed that "the lights" were "much brighter" in suburban malls.

The shift from urban to suburban shopping began before World War II, but the change was most dramatic in the postwar years. Early *strip malls* appeared on busy suburban roads along with car dealerships, diners, bowling alleys, furniture stores, and low-end department stores. At these open-air centers, consumers walked from their cars to stores connected by a sidewalk and a canopy. Strip malls paid little attention to consumers' comfort apart from their need to hunt for a parking space.

Next came the *shopping mall*, a self-contained, inward-looking, pedestrian-friendly space. The layout of the first of these new malls, including Shopper's World in Framingham outside of Boston, emulated the colonial village green, suggesting an alternative to crowded downtowns and unsightly commercial strips. But the weather remained an issue. As they darted from store to store, shoppers still sweltered in the summer, got wet in the rain, and, in places like Massachusetts, shivered in the winter.

Substantial changes came with the introduction of the *regional shopping mall*, introduced in 1956 and dominant by the 1970s. Architect Victor Gruen, the "father of the shopping mall," designed these commercial spaces as completely self-contained environments. His first enclosed mall, the Southdale Shopping Center in Edina, Minnesota, offered ample parking and was disconnected from the highway. Its large blocky buildings with plain facades looked like a cohesive whole only from the air. Automobile use determined the size, layout, and placement of the stores. Gruen had to provide easy access from everywhere in the parking lot, with the aim of ushering consumers into the temperature-controlled environment as quickly as possible.

The regional shopping mall became one of the most familiar types of retailing space in America. A typical regional mall housed a hier-

archy of stores. National powerhouses like J. C. Penney's and Sears, Roebuck and Company, or regional department stores like Dayton's, the Minneapolis retailer that built Southdale, were dubbed "anchors," while chains of specialty stores, movie theaters, restaurants, and food courts composed the rest of the retail businesses one could find under the same roof. Opening and closing at designated hours, the regional shopping mall was clean, well-lighted, and climate-controlled.

Finally, the most impressive retailing space was the *super-regional shopping mall*. By 2005, the largest of these American shopping destinations—the King of Prussia Mall west of Philadelphia (1962) and the Mall of America outside of Minneapolis—St. Paul (1995)—were national tourist attractions and models for mega-malls in Europe and Asia. Both comprised several major department stores and hundreds of chain stores, luxury boutiques, and restaurants. The Mall of America has family-friendly amenities, including a seven-acre amusement park.

Suburban shopping centers and malls developed in response to the declining fortunes of the central business district and the cultural desire for better living. By the 1950s, the great downtown department stores, from John Wanamaker's to Marshall Field's, faced rapidly declining profits. Suburban strips were stealing customers from these palatial stores, whose emphasis on customer service, quality, and high style seemed outmoded. Postwar consumers—young families in the new suburbs, older folks who wanted to spruce up their surroundings, and people getting by on tight budgets—valued low prices, self service, and locations accessible by car. They also appreciated shopping in an environment free from the crime and dirt of decaying inner cities.

Another important development at the low end of this market was the discount store, a large self-service merchandiser that resembled a variety chain on steroids. Frank Woolworth had created the dime store for blue-collar shoppers, but suburbanization and deindustrialization eroded this customer base in older sections of the country. Signs of change first appeared in New England, where mill closings depressed the economy and killed the old downtowns. In the 1950s, discount chains such as Ann and Hope, Turnstyle, Marshall's, Zayre, and Ames moved into old factories or built stores on the outskirts, luring those Woolworth shoppers who had cars. These "soft goods

supermarkets" provided free parking, familiar dime-store amenities such as lunch counters, and a wide selection of everyday necessities at rock-bottom prices. By 1962, discount retailing was a \$4.25 billion business with 1,500 stores; fourteen top chains led the pack with \$1 billion in sales.

Among those 1,500 stores were the brand-new Kmart, Wal★Mart, and Target, destined to become the three dominant merchants in the discount market. S. S. Kresge Company, a five-and-ten based in Detroit, opened eighteen Kmarts on commercial strips in 1962. Kmart targeted blue-collar shoppers but offered more merchandise, supermarket-style checkouts, and free parking. In the same year, Arkansas entrepreneur Sam Walton launched a discount chain for Southern tastes: Wal★Mart Discount City. The maverick among these discount babies was Target, founded by the family who ran Dayton's, a luxury department store in Minneapolis. Building on this heritage, Target, also established in 1962, positioned itself as an upscale discountier.

Back in 1937, New Deal fair-trade laws had mandated that retailers sell trademarked or branded items at prices set by the manufacturer. These fair trade laws had been created to protect small retailers against early chain stores. By the 1950s, however, discount stores were blatantly ignoring the fair trade laws to undersell the competition. Shoppers voted for lower prices when they deserted traditional retailers and patronized discounters that sold nationally advertised brands or private labels for less. Consumers who once strolled down Main Street to browse through the department stores, five-and-tens, and appliance shops began driving to Wal★Mart to fill up their shopping carts.

Department stores, which had competed on service and style, were decimated as their profit margins sank to levels below those of the Great Depression. Many wrestled with their declining fortunes by following the money to the suburbs where they helped build regional malls. A department store like Strawbridge & Clothier, a major Philadelphia retailer, could collaborate with an architect like Victor Gruen and a developer like James Rouse to create a total commercial environment such as Cherry Hill Mall in New Jersey. Professional mall managers determined which tenants were "in" and which were "out." This tactic allowed the anchor to design a sales mix that complemented its stock and attracted consumers from certain socioeconomic groups.

Because operating costs—taxes, wages, and utilities—were lower outside the city, the mall kept longer hours than did center-city stores, making evenings and weekends into important shopping times.

Although enclosed malls have never comprised more than 5 percent of the total number of shopping destinations, their enormous popularity has made them into cultural icons. By the 1980s, the regional mall was the major hangout spot for teenagers, replacing the dance hall, bowling alley, and hamburger joint as the leisure destination of choice. The 1983 movie *Valley Girl* shows the stereotypical Southern California blonde, Julie Richman, frequenting the local San Fernando Galleria with her girlfriends. The girls enjoyed themselves in the mall, shopping at “the really great shoe stores” and boutiques for “the neatest mini-skirts” and, of course, meeting boys.

In 2005, the International Council of Shopping Centers, a trade association for all types of malls, published statistics on the growth of suburban retailing. In 1945, the United States had a few hundred shopping centers; by 1963, the number had grown to 7,100. In 1980, there were 22,000. By 2005, the United States had 49,000 shopping centers, which attracted 191 million adults—nearly two-thirds of the population—each month!

Making Ends Meet

By the late 1960s, major weaknesses in the political economy, especially overspending for the Great Society and the Vietnam War, produced a recession that suggested calamity lay ahead. In the next two decades, Baby Boomers in their twenties and thirties, who had rarely known hardship, suddenly confronted harsh economic realities: oil and gasoline shortages, job losses and a high rate of unemployment, dislocation, and stagflation. For the first time, Boomers had to watch their wallets and pocketbooks, pinching pennies as had their grandparents in the Great Depression.

This economic stress, combined with the value shifts of the 1960s, led Americans to think about goods less as identity markers and more as commodities. The important props of the postwar suburbs—Frigid-aire refrigerators, Wonder Bread, Wash-and-Wear clothes, and Chevy convertibles—lost a good deal of their appeal. The GI Generation

had valued their stoves and station wagons, much as the physician or engineer of the 1920s took pride in his Oakland sedan, but for Baby Boomers in the 1970s, appliances and automobiles were no longer novel. Newcomers to abundance, such as recent immigrants or poor Americans, may have thrilled in owning a washer-dryer, but for consumers who grew up in GI Towns, swooning over a stove was merely comedic material for cartoons, sitcoms, and commercials. In the 1970s, the 25-year-old Boomer, who spent her girlhood in Levittown, focused less on accumulation and more on making ends meet.

This psychic shift pushed appliances and automobiles into another stage in the product life cycle. By the 1970s, consumers saw cars as commodities, possessions that every American expected to have. The simplified designs of the era reflected these utilitarian values. In 1971, the *Wall Street Journal* summarized the new attitude, which eerily barked back to the days of the Model T: “Where once they viewed their cars as fun and something special to own, they currently are frustrated or bored with their cars,” the *Journal* explained. “The novelty and status of car ownership are long gone. So they look at their auto as an appliance—to get them economically from place to place and to be replaced when it wears out.”

Edge Cities and Big-Box Retailers

In the 1970s and 1980s, suburbia entered another stage in its evolution, paralleling the movement of industry and commerce. As businesses migrated to even more remote locales, the suburb, once a bedroom community, morphed into a new type of city in its own right. Shopping malls drew department stores, while colleges, universities, and hospitals established suburban branches. People now lived and died in these new landscapes, in oversized luxury homes called McMansions and rowhouses reinvented as townhomes. Historian Robert Fishman called these places “techno-burbs,” while the *Washington Post*'s Joel Garreau coined the memorable term “Edge Cities.”

The Edge City originated in the postwar boom, when the real-estate industry recognized that commercial development could provide extraordinary investment returns. In the 1954 Internal Revenue Code, Congress introduced “accelerated depreciation,” an antirecession

move to stimulate speculative building. Real-estate developers had a field day, putting up buildings along strips quickly and cheaply. Small roadside businesses, such as motels and diners, yielded to chains and franchises that could take advantage of the tax write-offs: Holiday Inn, McDonald's, and, eventually, discounters like Kmart and Wal-Mart. The bonanza lasted for more than thirty years, until Ronald Reagan's Tax Reform Act of 1986 ended the spree. Meanwhile, commercial strips had cropped up on the far outskirts of major cities, creating offices and stores for suburbanites who never, ever ventured into the center city. The new downtowns included Tyson's Corner, Virginia; Scottsdale, Arizona; and San Jose, California, to name a few. Americans no longer commuted from suburb to city, but used the beltways and highways to zip around the periphery, from node to node.

Urban retailing buckled under the pressure. Geared to middle- and upper-class shoppers, downtown department stores watched the last of their traditional customers disappear and their fortunes decline. Discounters like Kmart did well because their cut-rate prices and no-frills merchandising appealed to consumers forced into frugality. After 1975, discounters blossomed, benefiting from the Consumer Goods Pricing Act, which repealed the New Deal fair-trade laws. "The best way to ensure that consumers are paying the most reasonable price for consumer products," President Gerald R. Ford explained after signing the law, "is to restore competition in the marketplace."

The balance of power in retailing shifted to big suburban discounters. Smaller family-owned retailers that prided themselves in personalized service shut their doors, unable to compete with these large warehouse stores. In discount stores, colorful packages replaced human beings who had once advised customers on their purchases. The discounter's stock-in-trade consisted of national brands, which manufacturers promoted through aggressive television and magazine advertising. Cost-cutting measures included computer-controlled inventory, active supply-chain management, bulk deals with manufacturers, part-time labor without benefits, and a heavy reliance on cheap imports.

Bitten by stagflation, many middle-class Americans could no longer afford to shop at Sears or Macy's for their needs. Like blue-collar shoppers, they got in their cars and drove to discount stores,

where everything seemed to be a few pennies cheaper. Kmart became famous for its "blue-light specials," markdowns for budget-conscious shoppers. The "bigger bang for your buck" theme took on new meaning as the dollar weakened. Average Americans shopped, not for flashy luxuries, but for deals on toothpaste, T-shirts, and toys.

In the long run, discount stores like Kmart, Wal-Mart, and Target changed the way consumers shopped through the relentless pursuit of standardization and endless cost reductions. Kmart's story illustrates the consolidation that changed the face of retailing over the past four decades. In 1966, Kresge's sales topped \$1 billion for the first time. By 1977, however, Kresge had changed its name to Kmart to reflect the 94.5 percent of its U.S. sales that came from the discounter. By 1981, Kmart had more than 2,000 stores in the United States and Canada, and in 1987, it dumped its remaining five-and-tens. Kmart went upmarket by hiring Martha Stewart as its lifestyle consultant. But, by 2002, competition with Wal-Mart and Target had eroded Kmart's position, and it filed for bankruptcy. A year later, the retailer re-emerged as Kmart Holding Corporation and in 2005 was combined with Sears, Roebuck and Company to form Sears Holdings Corporation. Kmart's history makes heads spin, but it shows the instability of retailing in Boomer America.

During the 1990s, yet another format emerged: the big-box retailer. Wal-Mart established itself as the indisputable leader in this category, developing warehouse stores and super-centers that put groceries, tires, and general merchandise under one roof, with gasoline pumps in the parking lot. When Kmart was the dominant discounter in the 1980s, Wal-Mart was still an upstart regional retailer with 1,000 stores and 84 warehouse "clubs" in twenty states. In the 1990s, Wal-Mart grew dramatically by developing super-centers and aggressively pursuing international expansion. By 2005, the Arkansas-based discounter topped the global *Fortune* 500 list.

These changes had important consequences for consumer society. The downtown department store, the Victorian palace of consumption, spiraled into its final decline. Between the 1970s and the 2000s, many local and regional stores—such as Wanamaker's, Strawbridge's, Gimbel Brothers, Lit Brothers, and Snellenburg's in Philadelphia—shut their doors or were bought by other retailers and eventually absorbed

by Macy's Inc. Discounters accounted for 27 percent of general retail sales in 1987; they controlled 41 percent in 1996. Department stores lost their share of retail sales, slipping from 20 percent in 1987 to 14 percent in 1996. Some consumers welcomed the rise of big-box retailers like Wal-Mart, whose warehouse prices allowed people of modest means to enjoy a middle-class lifestyle. For others, the demise of department stores and traditional shops and the commercial "death" of downtown—in small towns, cities big and small, and even some suburbs—signaled the erosion of product differentiation, which had always been vital to personal expression, as well as any uniqueness their hometown had offered.

What did Americans expect from consumer society during the whirlwind 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s? How did the relentless quest to drive down costs affect consumer choices, the store-bought products people put in their identity kits? What role did new technologies like television and the digital revolution play in reforming people's ideas about goods? These major questions drive this book to its conclusion. Let's take a closer look at two important categories of consumer products—apparel and electronics—to see how tastes have evolved since World War II, and how generational shifts, market segmentation, retail consolidation, and globalization have influenced the types of things Americans defined as meaningful.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Casual Style

In her 1999 book, *The End of Fashion*, journalist Teri Agins, the *Wall Street Journal's* senior fashion reporter, puzzled over one of the great conundrums of recent consumer history: Why did so many Americans—the most affluent consumers on earth—often dress down in jeans, T-shirts and athletic shoes? Less than a hundred years ago, the average American aspired to the beauty of the Gibson Girl and the Arrow Man. By the New Millennium, people wore casual clothes to work, church, and when stepping out. Where did dressing down originate, and why is it now synonymous with American style?

The Marie Look

After World War II, Parisian glamour and American casual vied for dominance of women's fashion. The French style bumped into the new American phenomenon: suburbanization, the materials revolution, the popluuxe effect, and market segmentation.

When the *couture* salons reopened after the war, the sensation of 1947 was Christian Dior's fall collection, including the Corolla line, a romantic Victorian silhouette. Nicknamed the "New Look"