CHAPTER SIX

Planning the New “Suburbscape”

Shoppers are, in a sense, a captive audience in the clustered mall.

—Women's Wear Daily, 1956

In 1954 Gruen was beginning to enjoy national success. Northland was one of the most popular and profitable shopping centers in the country, and newspapers and magazines unabashedly celebrated his achievement. Indeed, it was at this time in his career that Gruen seemed to hit his stride. And it was then that he came up with his single greatest contribution to American retailing, and perhaps to American consumer culture: the enclosed shopping mall. While he had first proposed the idea in 1950 for Montclair shopping center in Houston, he still had not realized the concept of bringing many different stores and entertainment under one roof.

The ambitious shopping center proposal was made for Dayton's department store of Minneapolis. It was a plan born of hubris, a dear memory, and a future dream. Dayton's first announced its Southdale project in June 1952. After nine months of market analysis undertaken by Larry Smith, the department store acquired 463 acres southwest of Minneapolis, seven miles from the loop, paying approximately $1.5 million for the land, or nearly $3,000 an acre. Dayton's immediately petitioned the town of Edina for a zoning change from residential to commercial. The department store had developer also mailed a flyer to Edina residents announcing a public hearing where Dayton's would explain Southdale's "importance to modern suburban living" and "the question of zoning." The small town acted quickly and gave Dayton's the zoning change by July. "An almost unanimous show of hands by an estimated 250 to 300 Edina citizens resulted in the Edina Village voting necessary zoning changes," one retailing magazine reported. Dayton's

set aside eighty-four acres for Gruen's shopping center, which would serve an intended audience of 210,000. This was no ordinary shopping center; the department store promised to build an entire new community. It would transform the sleepy town of 15,000 into the Minneapolis suburb of Edina. The remaining four hundred acres of the tract would be developed following a Master Plan that included houses, apartment buildings, a park, a medical center, a lake, highways, and schools. The department store would plan, finance, and build the entire suburban community.

For his Minneapolis commission, Gruen closely followed Northland's successes. He sought to bring commerce, entertainment, and art to the Minneapolis suburbs. In two respects, however, Gruen broke new
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FIGURE 29. Gruen’s proposed master plan for the area around Southdale Shopping Center in Edina, Minnesota, conceived to limit the amount of suburban sprawl; the plan was not implemented. From Victor Gruen and Larry Smith, Shopping Towns USA (New York: Reinhold, 1960), 108.

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