

As modern as 1948

Buildings have a symbolic as well as a 'useful' role, insofar as they are designed to demonstrate a culture's vision of the phenomenal world. The time has come, perhaps, to re-think Mies van der Rohe's observation that "... all architecture is bound up with its time ... it can only be manifested in living tasks and in the medium of its epoch."

Something interesting is happening in the USA. Updated versions of "traditional" styles are becoming increasingly popular and are displacing "modern" styling.

A survey of Houston's service stations dramatizes the issue. The building type itself is of interest as it is the product of the same technological era as Modern Architecture — its generic name "service station" seems indeed to promise a close relation to functionalism.

Houston is in many respects the seat of the petroleum industry; it is a natural proving ground for a representative solution. It has, moreover, developed since the end of World War II, so that its physical environment is largely new, suggesting that there is little difficulty in relating the latest stylistic forms to the urban scene.

A large number of Houston's service stations are being upgraded.

Functional-streamline-enamel-metal-flat roof "modern" is being replaced by vernacular-associative-brick-shingle-wood-mansard-gabled-dormered—"traditional" styles. Very rarely does even the Elliot Noyes Mobil prototype (the epitome of 1960's High Industrial design) stand in a pure form. Most of the companies appear to accept modern styling only conditionally, except insofar as they use mass-produced versions of traditional shapes.

Modernism, it appears, is old-fashioned: "modern" means late 1940's styling; it means the consumer aesthetic of the Eisenhower Era (when "Danish Modern" was the rage); it means the stark lines of the "tailored look".

It means more than this, however. "Modern" may now be the style of a special group; it may no longer have the plurality of associations that a mass culture requires. Professionalism continues, therefore, to serve the tastes of an élite. The exceptions in styling prove the rule. Cases in point are the Enco Car Care Center and the prestige Gulf Station, "architect-designed" and embodying the latest fashionable architectural shapes. "Modern" is a style like any other style and in its various forms is either old-fashioned (as modern as 1948) or the "official style" of an elite client used in a particular context.

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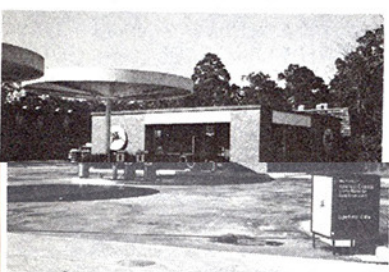
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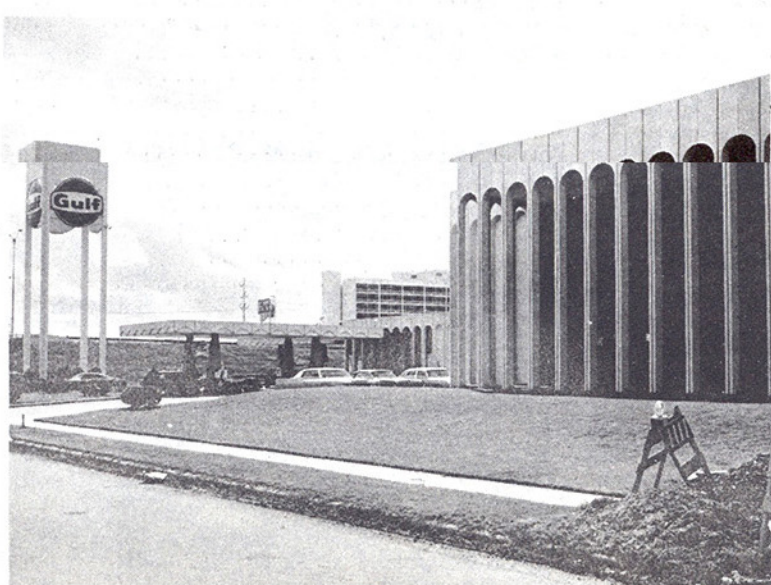
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Case studies of various petroleum companies illustrate the evolution from the initial prototype. Most early service stations took the form of a basic box-shape¹ or a box with a canopy². This arrangement was quickly clothed in a functional style of flat roofs, thin column supports, and glazed surfaces³.

Occasional flamboyant moderne manifestations in the same materials affected the basic prototype and some companies maintained this aesthetic for many years⁴ as in the case of Mobil, which seems to favour a more architectural approach.

However, by the mid-1960's a more domestic scale was evolved with residential overtones⁶ incorporating devices such as a peaked or mansard roof and the use of unfunctional but "human" materials such as brick or fieldstone. There also began to appear mutations, usually in the form of a prototypical station with a veneer of new styling⁵.

More recent examples also incorporate services such as a car wash and are styled overtly in traditional elements⁷ or produce some rather strange details when layered over an existing structure. Companies which elected to use industrial and architectural designers in recent times⁸ use them only conditionally⁹.

Exceptions to the rule are the Enco Car Care Center next to the Humble Research Headquarters and incorporating the same architectural elements, or the prestige Gulf station which echoes the forms of the Gulf Research Headquarters¹⁰.