

GM on Designing and Planning Automotive Dealerships, 1948 by Michael Bogle

In 1948, General Motors Corporation released a 157-page illustrated book of “ideas” for the design development of the GM dealer network. The introduction describes the content as “a basis for discussing building specifications with architects and contractors” and a methodology for “...guarding against premature obsolescence.” (1) The book is available on a number of internet sites. (2)



Figure 1. “Dealership with Gasoline Station”, *Designing and Planning Automotive Dealerships*, p.78. The “ideas” (in reality, design concepts and scaled floor plans) are the result of a competition announced in 1945 in *Architectural Forum*. (3)

The journal had been an enthusiastic supporter of automobile-driven architecture as early as 1920. The competition attracted the attention of young architects and designers from the United States and Canada and the entries were juried by business associates and AIA luminaries such as Alfred Shaw, Timothy Pflueger and William Wurster, Dean of Architecture and Planning, MIT, Boston at the time of the competition.



Figure 2. “Dealership with petrol bowsers.” *Page Motors, Pomona, QLD*, designer unknown, 1950. *Sunshine Coast Libraries*, (M863887).

Channelling Arthur Miller’s “Death of a Salesman” while setting the scene for the architecture for new car sales, GM outlines the “Four A’s of Display Selling” for new vehicles. They are: Attraction;

Atmosphere; Appearance; and Appraisal. The architecture showroom should compete with the streetscape elements and provide a “psychologically attractive” interior architecture. (4)

Line drawings and half-tones illustrate the salient design issues for an active streetscape and the point of view is generally assumed to be that of a passing motorist. A great deal of attention is focussed on window placement, designing for adverse reflections, night views and internal lighting.

For GM, the motorcar is modernism’s leading disruptor. While GM advises that the “store front” should identify with the community and neighbourhood, the design should insure that modernism is not cast aside. “A store front should give the impression of being modern, irrespective of the year in which the building was constructed,” GM advises. “A building that is modern in appearance suggests that the products [...] of the business are modern.” (5)

The book concludes with a generously illustrated section titled “Problems, Plans and Perspectives” which includes anonymous colour illustrations of dealerships designed for particular sites such as a “Dealership with Gasoline Station” or “On the Fringe of a Business District” and other setting



scenarios.

Figure 3. “On the Fringe of a Business District.” Designing and Planning Automotive Dealerships, p.106. The designs and perspectives suggest green-field sites where dealerships can capture the real estate necessary to parade GM products. While providing maximum exposure, urban sites are costly; a predicament also canvassed in *Designing and Planning Automotive Dealerships*.

In comparison, a modest survey of Australian dealerships suggests that by the mid-20th century, urban and inner suburbs dealerships remained in the ascendant although held back by the retarded development of post-war suburbs and transport networks. A selection of illustrations sample showrooms by Arthur Baldwinson, Neville Gruzman, Harry Norris, Woods Bagot, Laybourne-Smith & Irwin and others establish an Australian context for GM’s 1948. “Design Competition for Dealer Establishments.” There are many other nationwide automobile showroom designs and designers awaiting recognition.

In the 21st century, the automobile as the “Great Disruptor” continues its habits as motorcar showrooms shoulder their way back into the central business district in Sydney with a TESLA dealership in Martin Place and a Hyundai Genesis showroom in Sydney’s Pitt Street Mall with further sites identified in Melbourne and Brisbane.

GM's 1948 book and the potential for the study of the architecture and design of Australian motorcar dealerships strongly suggests a conference theme and/or longitudinal studies of this rewarding topic.



Figure 4. Arthur Baldwinson, Arrow Motors, Double Bay, Sydney, 1954, (Demolished). Woollahra Library (89487)



Figure 5. "On the Fringe of a Business District." Dalgety & Company, Adelaide, Woods, Bagot, Laybourne-Smith & Irwin, Architects, 1938. State Library of South Australia, Photo Keith Phillips (B 75227/1).

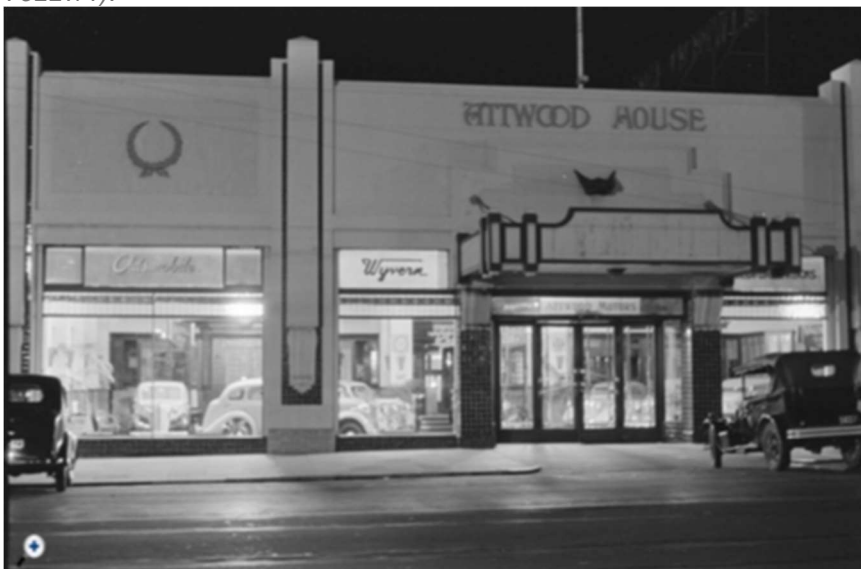


Figure 6. "Highly Competitive Location." Attwood Motors, Stirling Street, Perth, 1930 (Photo 1939). State Library of Western Australia, Photo W.F. Hooton (128358PD).



Figure 7. "Intersection of Main Thoroughfares." Neville Gruzman, Purnell Motors, Arncliffe, Sydney, 1958. State Library of NSW, Photo Max Dupain, (PXA 1131).



Figure 8. "On the Fringe of a Business District." Melford Motors, Elizabeth Street, Melbourne, Harry A. Norris, 1937. *Construction and Real Estate Journal*, 24 November, 1937, p.7.

Footnotes:

- 1 Preface, *Designing and Planning Automotive Dealerships*, p.ii2
- 2 <https://archive.org/details/PlanningAutomobileDealersProperties/page/n15>
- 3 "Design Competition for Dealer Establishments." *Architectural Forum*, 83: 10, 1945, pps.117- 124. The competition presented five design problems with a young I.M. Pei winning a third prize in one of the categories. *Architectural Forum* closed in 1974.
- 4 *Designing and Planning Automotive Dealerships*, p.2
- 5 "Identify the Store Front with the Times." *ibid.*, p.68

Michael Bogle is a design historian specialising in Australian architecture and design. He recently contributed a chapter "Lessons from Things: European design training" in the interwar years for Rebecca Hawcroft's *The Other Moderns*, (UNSW Press, 2017). He was elected to the Design Institute of Australia's Hall of Fame in 2014