The iconography of the petrol station : in an age of auto-mobility

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The Iconography of the Petrol Station

In an Age of Auto-mobility

Fig. 1, *Gas*, Edward Hopper, 1940, oil on canvas, source: Walter Wells, Silent T*heater. The Art of Edward Hopper*, London: Phaidon 2007, pp. 220–221.

Fig. 2, J.S Gutman *A welcome respite*, 1955, Oil on canvas. Source: Cited in Daniel I. Vieyra, *Fill'er Up*, New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1979, p. 52.

The beginning of the automotive age was marked not only by Ford's Model T. There were also the economically driven strategies developed by oil companies that aimed at turning the roadside gas station into a branded beacon with powerful iconography. The building typology that arose out of these actions has since evolved into a cultural icon for our ever-expanding mobile society. Drawing from the art work of Edward Hopper as well as advertising material produced by oil companies during this period, the following paper explores the gas station and its role as a branded beacon, turning as well to Shell's RVI (Retail Visual Identity) project to further explore this theme in contemporary built form.

Born out of the necessity for a new mode of transportation, the gas station gave rise to a new architectural typology. Hand in hand with the automobile, it came to symbolize the automotive age. Resolutely anchored along the side of the highway, this building type provided the perfect counterpart to the newly emancipated mobile motorist restricted only by the periodic need to pull over and refuel. Keen on promoting the image of the gas station as a abiding presence along the highway that facilitated and aided 'limitless' travel, oil companies sought to provide travelers with a welcome, familiar and easy-to-spot roadside refuge. Edward Hopper's painting *Gas* captures the essence of this roadside refuge, depicting the warm glow of the station that provided a welcome contrast to the dark unknown road beyond and the human presence provided by the humble proprietor tending to his station, diligently keeping it open to travelers in need. Art historian Walter Wells notes the importance of *Gas* in encapsulating all that the American gas station had come to symbolize when he writes: "Owing largely to the power of American advertising, gas stations had by 1940 established themselves as emblems of both the liberating mobility of automobiles and the anonymity of the open highway. In the American Psyche, they were clearly more than just necessities of the automotive age."

Gas epitomized the notion of a roadside 'beacon-cum-brand-icon', so essential to the gas station that its absence may indeed render the structure just another faceless building along the highway. Quick to spot, this icon would elicit a sense of comforting familiarity in travelers, signaling a welcome place to stop and rest along one's journey. Wells describes the effect this branded beacon evokes in the painting: "Perchance the weary, nightbound motorist, once provided by this mercantile Pegasus with a place to rest, refuel, and, if needed, obtain more air, can also, like the winged steed himself, thereafter o'ervault the night, transcend the otherwise forbidding darkness, and keep on going till the sun returns."

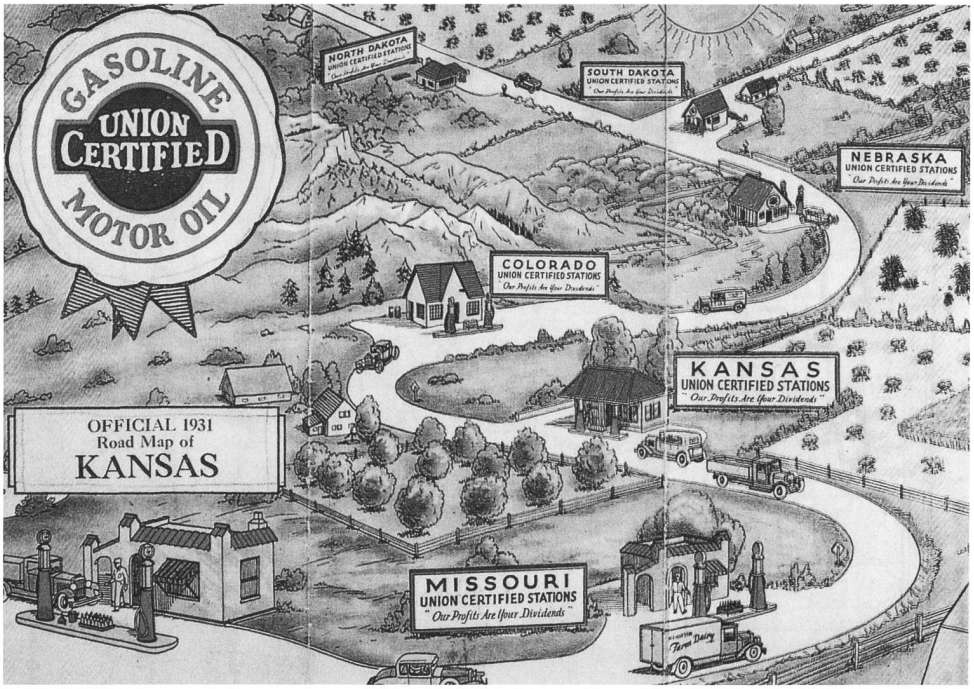

Fig. 3, Union Certified Motor Oil and Gasoline Company, Official roadmap of Kansas, 1931. Source: John Margolies, *Pump and Circumstance. Glory Days of the Gas Station*, Singapore: Little, Brown and Company Limited 1993, p. 36.

Used for marketing purposes, the painting *Texaco* (Fig. 2) portrays the gas station as a sanctuary against the unforgiving elements. Depicted as a lighthouse along the roadside, the Texaco brand serves as a bright, bold, exalted beacon – the only star in the sky. The message conveyed here is clear: when you spot a Texaco sign, you know you've arrived at a welcoming, sheltering, indispensable stop off on your journey. The brand thereby becomes equated with the refuge every motorist seeks. As Wells describes, gas stations are "well-lighted sanctuaries against the night [...] stopping points of almost universal need. As such, they impress themselves indelibly on our psyches." The gas station was portrayed as an automotive haven along the highway in the same vein an oasis serves a desert caravan trail. It became a welcome and sought out stop – a place to pull over, rest, refuel, restock, and ask for directions or buy a map. Oil companies knew that travelers had to stop to 'fill'er up', so they focused on making this necessary stop as pleasant and easy as possible. The need to render the gas station a friendly and easy-to-spot beacon amidst the myriad of roadways only grew as this newfound individualized freedom of travel really began to take off. A weekend drive through the country became the new great American pastime and oil companies were quick to capitalize on this growing tendency. Companies saw the benefit in marrying their own brand icons with the freedom and flexibility symbolized in the car. In an effort to link freedom of travel to pleasant, ample, easy fuel service, their advertisements painted an ideal picture of America, offering up romanticized depictions of picturesque landscapes and winding open roads that led up to their gas stations.

Fig. 4, Richfield Strip Maps, Pacific Coast States, The H. M. Gousha Company for Richfield Oil Corporation, Chicago, 1937.

Nowhere was this connection more frequently emphasized than in the road maps proliferated in gas stations across America during the early 20th century. In his studies of early road maps, the author of *Pump and Circumstance: Glory Days of the Gas Station*, John Margolies states: "Given out by the oil companies as the ultimate piece of advertising to promote the use of their products, the maps charted the yellow brick roads of our collective imagination." The gas stations – the only identifiable icon on these road map covers – were welcoming refuges, friendly and familiar places to stop along the otherwise anonymous and unknown highway. (Fig. 3) The first commercial road maps were developed by oil companies in line with the evolution of the automobile, making the gas station the first geographical marker in a new, mobile America

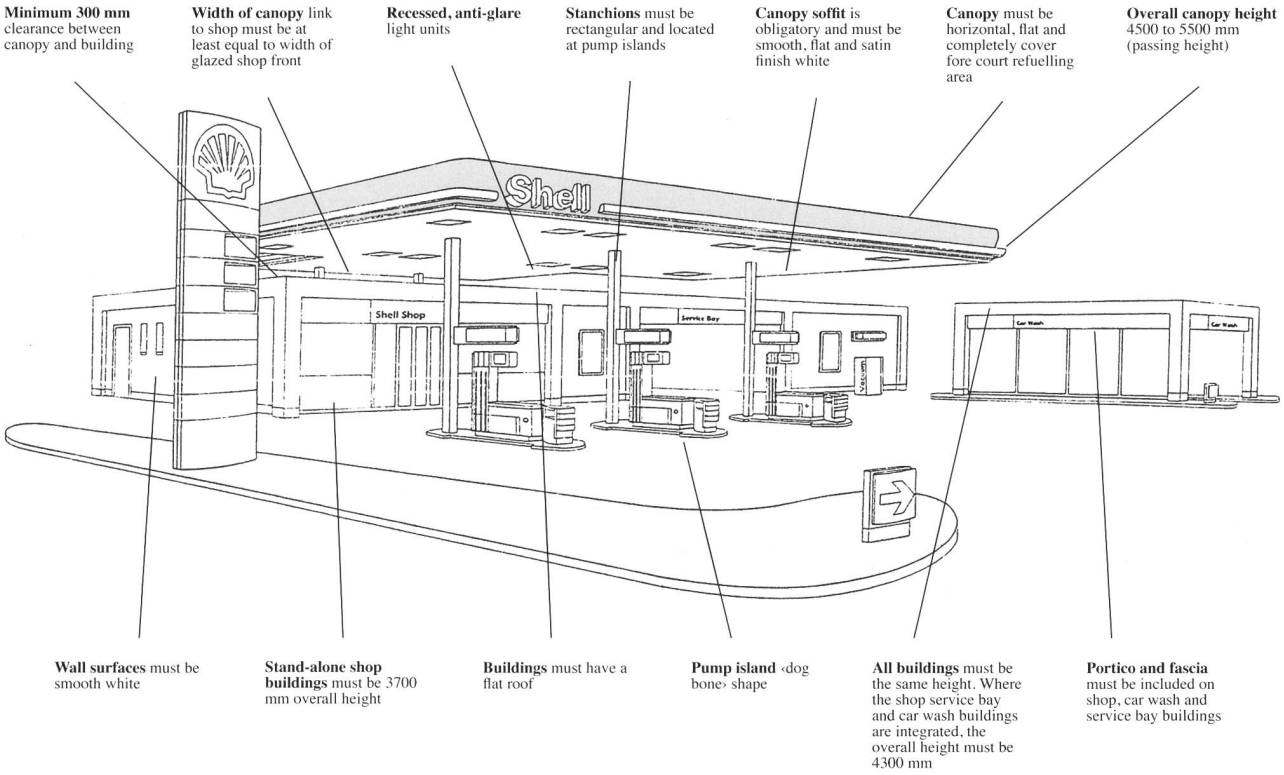

Fig. 5, All the elements of the Shell RVI 'world design', Royal Dutch Shell PLC, 1990. Source: Martin Pawley, "The Last Modern Project", in: *World Architecture*, 26 (1993), p. 84–85.

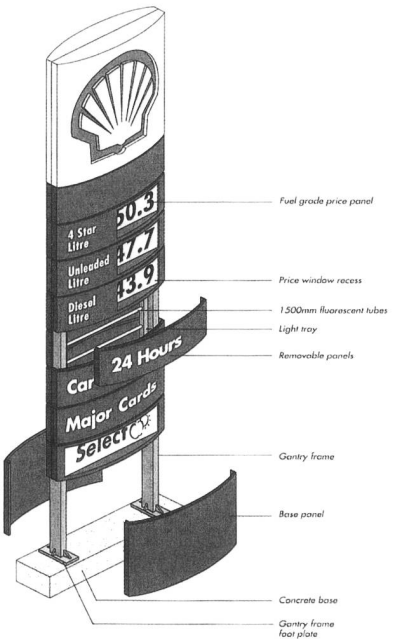

Fig. 6, branded totem, Shell RVI , Royal Dutch Shell PLC, 1990. Source: Martin Pawley, "The Last Modern Project", in: *World Architecture*, 26 (1993), p. 84–85.

as well as an icon of travel and mobility. On the cover of the Union Certified Oil roadmap (Fig. 4), a winding road is depicted running through a series of states – each denoted by nothing more than a Union Certified gas station and its sign. This told motorists that they could expect the same familiar gas station sign and the same friendly service no matter what state they were in. In this sense, the gas station attendant operated as a vital intermediary between the driver and the newfangled automobile technology. Daniel Vieyra describes this trend in his book *Fill 'er Up. An Architectural History of America's Gas Stations*: "Despite the thrill of automobile travel, fear of the unknown colored long-distance trips. Petroleum companies standardized their affiliate stations so that they would be a familiar sight in an otherwise unfamiliar landscape." Gas stations as standardized, familiar, welcoming beacons along the highway proved to be the main point of reference in the development modern day marketing strategies.

Competition as well as the ever-present desire to optimize led oil companies to develop standardization projects. The RVI (Retail Visual Identity) project undertaken by the Shell oil company in the early nineties became the largest of these projects. Its ambitious aim was to refurbish over 40,000 Shell gas stations worldwide. This project highlights a modern day approach by an oil company to optimize its image – Shell decided to take the concept of a roadside beacon one step further. The major aim of the project was three-fold: to create a design that renders the gas station a familiar sight while placing the emphasis on 'convenience' rather than on gas as a 'product'; to develop an easy system for manufacturing and producing signs and visual identity materials that can be retrofitted to its already existing stores; and to create a design that operates as an instantly recognizable beacon across all national and cultural boundaries.The redesign has not taken on the traditionally 'architectural' vocabulary, as the spatial arrangement and function of the five vernacular elements of the modern gas station – large underground gasoline tanks, a roof canopy, a booth / shop, pump islands, and a branded totem facing towards the street – remain largely unchanged. Instead, it employs this established vernacular

building type, overlaying it with a standardized billboard style of communication to convey its message. The gas station's solidity as place, as the theorist Meaghan Morris makes clear, "is founded by its flexibility as frame for varying practices of space, time – and speed." The Shell gas station operates as a 3-D functional frame wrapped in two-dimensional surface imagery, synonymous in its aims of communication with the iconography of the early road maps. Vieyra extends this idea and points to its possible application in marketing when he states: "The gas station building itself was the largest packaging device available to gasoline marketers. As a three-dimensional billboard, the gas station certainly gained attention; when repeated across the countryside, it acquired extra sales value [...] In its communication with the motorist, the most important function the gas station performs is conveying an image."

In contrast to the earlier iconography of the gas station, the notion of putting a human face on the company and the station has disappeared and been replaced with the architectural symbol. Familiarity is no longer established through the friendly gas station attendant, but rather through a standardized, uniform architectural vocabulary that communicates solely through the building's envelope. The only habitable space, the shop, is treated not differently than the other constituent elements, and rather functions as one part of the larger graphic composition of the station that serves to impart Shell's message.

The RVI project both celebrates and seeks a place for Shell in the greater societal phenomenon of mobility – and sees the gas station as a viable tool for getting there. The project's concept draws from the earlier branded beacon marketing strategy, while employing new tactics in the form of standardization and brand recognition. The result: gas stations that enjoy high visibility and easy recognition. And what the gas station attendant once achieved, standardized building elements now deliver – a sense of familiarity and comfort. In other words, on the long stretch of highway, you know where you are when you enter a Shell gas station. Shell has evolved in sync with the automobile, managing to carve out a place for itself along the never ending road of mobility, operating as a standardized 'branded beacon' that invites motorists to stop off, relax, and refuel.

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Fig. 7, Shell station, Rio De Janeiro. Source: *Minale*, p. 44.
Fig. 8, Shell station, Zurich. Source: authors photograph, 2009.
Fig. 9, Shell station, Canada. Source: *Minale*, p. 45.

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