

SUBURBAN SQUARE SHOPPING CENTER  
St. James Square Place  
Ardmore  
Montgomery County  
Pennsylvania

HABS NO. PA-6053

HABS  
PA  
46-ARD,  
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
P.O. Box 37127  
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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Location: St. James Place, Ardmore, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania.

Significance: Suburban Square was the second planned shopping center in the United States. Its construction in the late 1920s and 1930s illustrated the developing decentralization of metropolitan retail outlets in response to downtown congestion, suburban residential growth, and the popularity of the automobile.

Description: Suburban Square is a complex of nine buildings bordered by Montgomery Avenue to the north, Anderson Avenue to the west, the former Pennsylvania Railroad main line to the south, and a large parking lot to the east. Five of the buildings sit within a trapezoid defined by Anderson Avenue, Montgomery Avenue, St. James Place (parallel to Anderson), and Coulter Avenue (parallel to the tracks). Within the trapezoid is a concrete pedestrian mall with plantings created in 1977 by closing streets previously open to cars. Three of the remaining buildings sit south of St. James Place, and one is located at the western corner of Anderson Avenue and Coulter Avenue. There is also a tenth building, a bank on Coulter Avenue, close to Suburban Square but not under its management.

The structures vary in style and date of construction, with the Art Deco buildings from the 1930s predominating. The two most prominent are the Strawbridge & Clothier department store and the Times Building, designed for offices. Strawbridge & Clothier opened in 1930 as a four-story rectangular Art Deco building with limestone facing and a steel and concrete frame. The store later added a two-story wing on its northern side which covered the original main entrance, moving that door to the corner of St. James and Montgomery. On each side is a stepped parapet wall. Most of the windows are six-over-six-light double-hung sash windows, single, paired or tripartite. Other details include low-relief bands above the first floor windows and a company seal above the main entrance. Red and white awnings currently cover each of the first floor openings.

Across the mall from Strawbridge and Clothier is the eight-story Times Building, which was named after the newspaper which was its first tenant. Also framed from steel and concrete, its facade is more elaborate than that of the department store. The piers between the three bays on each facade are faced with limestone, while spandrels are made with red and yellow bricks. The northeast and southwest facades have groups of four windows; the central bay of the southeast and northwest sides also has groups of four windows, but its side bays have three. Above the original two-story main entrance are low-relief panels with

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pictures of printers, newsboys, and mailmen. The original doorway has a metal surround, though a metal two-run stairway added in 1977 limits the view of this detail from the mall.

The remaining buildings are one or two stories and are generally covered with limestone or stucco. Most retain their original Art Deco design, though some have enlarged plate-glass windows (in some cases two windows have been combined into one). Two of the oldest structures, the Counties Title and Trust Company (corner of Montgomery and Anderson) and the old Post Office (north corner of Coulter and St. George), originally had Classical Revival details such as Doric pilasters and windows with rounded arches and keystones. Subsequent renovations have replaced these features with smooth-surfaced walls and plate glass windows. Also significantly altered is the movie theatre at the corner of St. James and Coulter. Originally covered with Art Deco details such as neon signage, enameled brick facing, and a curving exterior, the theatre's appearance changed markedly after it became shops in 1977. Though the marquee remains, the neon has been removed and stucco now covers the walls.

History: In 1926 the Suburban Company bought the 6.3 acre Dixon estate in Ardmore. The location had two significant advantages: easy transportation access from the Pennsylvania Railroad and Montgomery Avenue, and on the other side of the tracks was Lancaster Avenue, the center of Ardmore's commercial district.

Directing the project was Frederick C. Dreher, a Philadelphia architect who had suggested the creation of a full-service shopping area with ample free parking and easy access for suburban residents. Construction began in 1927 on the Counties Title and Trust Company, located at the corner of Montgomery and Anderson; adjoining it to the west were a series of storefronts and the Bell Telephone building. Next was a Post Office at the corner of Coulter and St. George. The first major retailer was the Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company, which opened its original grocery store in 1929. It was so successful they soon expanded, and was the subject of a story in Fortune magazine. Strawbridge and Clothier opened their first branch store here in 1930. A gas station opened just north of the store in 1930, and in 1931 the Times Building's first tenants moved in.

New construction soon stopped, however, as the Great Depression held income below projections; in 1931 the banks took ownership of the property. Construction resumed in the late 1930s with new stores along the north side of Coulter Avenue, and more stores and a theatre on the east side of St. James Place. Since the A & P store built a series of smaller stores in the 1940s, another grocery store was built behind the theatre in 1953. PSFS opened a bank in the 1950s across Coulter from the main mall. The final

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addition came in 1982 with a separate building farther down on the south side of Coulter Avenue.

Ownership of Suburban Square has changed a number of times since the bank took possession in the 1930s. In 1977 Intershop Holding, a Swiss firm which operated malls in several cities, purchased the property and created the pedestrian mall. The current tenants include many of the chains evident in other up-scale properties, including the Gap, Sharper Image, Ann Taylor, and the Nature Company.

Sources:

Longstreth, Richard. "The Neighborhood Shopping Center in Washington, D.C., 1930-1941," Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Vol. LI, No. 1, March 1992, pgs. 5-34.

Historian: William Wright, 1994