



THOMAS VANHAUTE

G A S

STATIONS

AN ILLUSTRATED
HISTORY

Lannoo



PENN OIL CO.

THE
DIAMOND
FILLING
STATION

LIGHTNING
MOTOR FUEL
25-35 - 40-45 - 48-50

BEST
MOTOR
OIL

GAL
QT.

TRADE
GAS





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A Penn Oil Co. gas "shack," Washington, DC (USA),
1920 (Library of Congress).

Esso service station, Bremen (Germany),
1952 (Staatsarchiv Bremen).



INTRODUCTION

Attempting to nominate the most influential technological breakthrough in human history has always triggered people's imagination. But it remains a challenging exercise: where should one start? Often, the wheel is credited with advancing the development of society the most. For some, it is the invention of the movable-type printing press in 15th-century Germany, enabling the rapid spread of ideas and knowledge. Others praise the invention of the lightbulb, credited with dramatically altering the rhythm of life and work by reducing our dependency on daylight. Could it perhaps be some major medical breakthrough, such as the development of penicillin by Scottish scientist Alexander Fleming in 1928, dramatically increasing human life expectancy? Or do we need to look much farther down history's trail (even beyond *Homo sapiens* altogether), to some 2.6 million years ago on the African continent, where early humans manipulated products from their natural surroundings into tools, enabling them to survive challenging environments? Humankind's ingenuity and drive to create—to both peaceful as well as destructive ends—has been of such richness that it is hard to single out one specific product of the human imagination that makes all others pale in comparison.

However, where technological breakthroughs in modern history are concerned, it is certain that a major advancement in industrial production and transportation was made with the invention of the steam engine in the early 18th century, followed by the development of the internal combustion engine nearly one hundred years later (without of course minimizing the role of electrical power). Both being pivotal in the shift from muscle power—both human and animal—to engine power, these two technologies were racing neck and neck for a while as the main power source of the future. Coinciding with the early exploitation of oil wells, the development of the internal combustion engine soon led to the latter proving to be the main power source in transportation for the next one hundred years.

Aside from the massive economic as well as political consequences presented by the introduction of oil onto the world market in the early 20th century, the automobile equally brought tremendous societal change on a level that was felt in everyday life. No longer was transportation dependent on either animal power or the presence of railroad tracks; the new oil-powered vehicle proved the ultimate vehicle of freedom. Initially, this new found freedom was reserved only for those who could afford the new technological wonder, but very soon—when American industrialist Henry Ford introduced cheap, mass-produced vehicles in the 1910s—nearly everyone could use and enjoy the latest and greatest mode of transportation. French industrial icon and founder of the eponymous car brand André Citroën, often referred to as the “Henry Ford of Europe,” thought “the car must be an instrument of work and pleasure for everyone.” Mass production, relatively low retail prices, and—certainly in the postwar period—rising wages and living standards propelled the automobile to stardom in

the Western world, as a powerful symbol of progress and status, as well as the ultimate hallmark of consumerism. For the first time in modern history, middle-class families could own a high-tech product previously only attainable by the very rich. From its conception at the end of the 19th century to the highly developed and ultra-efficient vehicles we know and use today, it was clear from the outset that the automobile was destined to play a major role in modern society and culture. The quintessential symbol of progress and personal freedom, cars became a theme in early movies, they inspired artists, and they even played a lead role in the birth of rock and roll. Cars were—and still are—everywhere.

With the automobile, of course, came other needs: paved roads, rubber tires, production and maintenance facilities and personnel, and—most of all—fuel and the practical and widespread distribution thereof. The high demand for motor fuel—gasoline—gradually led to the development of an entirely new commercial concept: the gas station (referred to in other English-speaking parts of the world as “petrol station” or “filling station”). Soon, the gas station would provide oil companies with a physical means of presenting themselves favorably to the consumer by means of chains of look-alike stations radiating an aura of recognizability and trustworthiness. Like the coaching inns of old that provided care for travelers and horses alike, the new gas stations were the modern-day beacons on the roadside, providing provisions and care for both drivers and their vehicles. The gas station concept quickly became a favorite with architects and designers, both those embracing the new modernist fashion of the late 1920s as well as those more traditionally inclined. The historic photographs presented in this volume are testament to the creativity and eagerness with which those architects and designers took to shaping the gas station. The gas station's attractive visual qualities, multiplied by its omnipresence in the roadside landscape of the mid-20th century have made it—certainly in America—a true cultural icon.

Just over one hundred years after the invention of the first gasoline-powered “horseless carriage” by German engineer Karl F. Benz in 1885, the reign of the gasoline-powered automobile seems to be coming to an end. Zero-emission and decarbonization policies, bans on gasoline and diesel vehicles, and the phasing out of hybrid vehicles by the middle of the next decade, coupled with major technological innovations in electrified mobility, will see the end of an era and the dawn of another as far as road transportation is concerned. Soon, gasoline- and diesel-powered vehicles will be seen only in private collections or as museum exhibits. Essentially, motorcars will become part of our heritage: instigating fond memories for some, perceived as the tools of a backward society by others.

But what about the built heritage that is connected to the age of the motorcar? As with the previous revolution in transportation—the arrival of the railroad system in the

middle of the 19th century—the arrival of the automobile in the early 20th century brought many other material consequences, mainly connected to the necessary infrastructure to keep producing, selling, maintaining, and driving these machines. Manufacturing and assembly plants, car salesrooms, garages, and gas and service stations: all of those building types were intrinsically connected to the fossil fuel-powered automobile. The reign of the great railroads has largely been taken over by automobiles, trucks, and airplanes, but we still use an important part of the infrastructure specific to the railroad system: train stations are still present and used in our everyday built environment, often in continuous use in their original role, even if adapted to modern-day railroad technology. But they are nonetheless considered as valuable heritage, and many would agree that it is indeed fortunate that they are still intact and operative, outdated and impractical for modern-day use as they sometimes may well be. Other vestiges of the previous industrial revolutions have been less fortunate: during the large-scale rebuilding and modernizing of the economic infrastructure in Europe after World War II, thousands of historical industrial sites were demolished to make room for their modern-day substitutes. In the process, countless valuable historical vestiges of human industrial endeavor and social history were lost forever.

As the new modes of mobility will sideline the old, new types of infrastructure will make the old ones redundant. In order not to make the mistakes that were made after previous industrial revolutions—that is, to discard and demolish the “old” amenities and buildings while ignoring their historical or societal significance—perhaps now, at the threshold of the new era in mobility, is the time to take stock of and to value certain aspects of the industrial heritage of the previous era in mobility, to make sure future generations can learn from the artifacts of the age of the internal combustion engine, and, hopefully, integrate them as sustainable assets by adaptively reusing them to fit entirely new needs.

Although this book will perhaps stir up fond memories of days gone by for some readers, its primary goal is not rooted in (false) nostalgia. It is merely an attempt to present a collection of visual testimonies of a concept typical of the age of gasoline-powered vehicles: the gas station. The unique images presented here—collected from public and private archives throughout the world—have been selected to represent a sample of the various ways in which the concept of the gas station around the globe was interpreted. Moreover, the book attempts to give insight into the societal role played by the gas station during its heyday: that of a place of work, a place of gathering, even a place of social equality and inequality at the same time. In doing so, perhaps a seed can be planted to open up debate on the heritage value and possibly the adaptive reuse of what remains of these industrial structures around the world. In this way, former gas stations can hopefully still play a role in the new era of sustainable mobility.

The gas station photographs from the 1930s, 1940s or 1950s are rarely taken as an instant snapshot: many of these images served a clear purpose.

THE PHOTOGRAPHS

All the images in this book are part of public or private historical archives from around the globe. Many come from state or municipal archives in the USA and Europe; others are part of company archives, usually from larger oil corporations. Some are taken by world-famous photographers, including Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, or Paul Almasy, who worked on commissions from governments or on personal projects. Others were made by unknown professionals, working freelance for oil corporations or government bodies. And then there are the amateur photographers, whose work has been donated to state archives after their passing. Judging by their work, these were often very keen and gifted street photographers, documenting the rapidly changing societies of the mid-20th century—including the gas stations that seemed to pop up everywhere in Europe after the World War II. Back then, a gas station was still somewhat of a novelty, worthy of more than a few photographs. Today, we rarely capture gas stations as we pass them, but during the 1950s, as middle-class people went on holiday, many for the first time, a stopover at a gas station was something to remember—and what better way than by means of a photograph?

The gas station photographs from the 1930s, 1940s or 1950s are rarely taken as an instant snapshot: many of these images served a clear purpose. Often, they were intended as commercial marketing tools, showing the quality staff or the state-of-the-art equipment at the gas stations. But even within the arsenal of propaganda shots, there are clear distinctions in style and approach. On the one hand, there are the very much staged scenes created by American corporate photographers, who often used an almost theatrical approach to set up the shot. On the other hand, there are some corporate photographers—like those working for Italian oil giant ENI in the 1950s—that succeed in disguising their photographs of gas and service stations as actual spontaneous snapshots, devoid of any obvious staging.

Of exceptional quality and historical relevancy are some of the photographs taken by the photographers of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) during the Great Depression years in the USA. Tasked with documenting the lives of sharecroppers in the American South, and migratory agricultural workers in the midwestern and western states, these images tell the story of American urban and rural life in the 1935–44 period. Cars were, by that time, already very common in all social groups across the USA, and so cars and gas stations feature extensively in the work of the FSA photographers. And as such, this body of work gives very good insight into the extent to which the gas station had penetrated every corner of America.

Unique in its own right is the remarkable photographic legacy of the American Harrison Forman (1904–78). Forman worked as a journalist and photographer for both *The New York Times* and *National Geographic* magazine and in this capacity traveled the world extensively. Curiously, Forman apparently had a personal interest in gas stations and captured dozens of them during his travels. It is through his photographs from gas stations across the world that we get a rare glimpse of just how international the concept of the gas station was, and to what extent oil corporations expanded their sales territories, using their own recognizable brand visuals and architecture.

As far as the visual documenting of gas station architecture in the USA is concerned, the work of the late John Margolies (1940–2016) has been paramount. Between the mid-1970 and the early 1990, Margolies—an architectural critic, photographer and author—made several road trips across the continental USA to document its roadside architecture, with a particular focus on gas stations. It is through his collection of Kodachrome slides (some 11,000 of those are now part Library of Congress' public domain *John Margolies Roadside America Photograph Archive*) that we get a unique insight into the fascinating world of American gas station architecture of the second half of the 20th century.



HISTORIC BACKGROUND

DAWN OF THE AUTOMOBILE AGE

The evolution of the human species has always been closely linked to its ability to move, from one place to another. Early humans needed to move in order to hunt, gather food, seek shelter, or run from danger. Later, mass migratory movements were crucial to the distribution of the species across the globe. But for most of human history, the movement of people occurred in its most basic manner: by putting one foot in front of the other. The distance a person could walk would have been dependent entirely on their physical ability and willingness to move on. Even when wild horses were first domesticated and used as a means of transportation, around 6,000 years ago, movement would still have been entirely dependent on (animal) muscle power. Ideas to replace animals by some kind of mechanized contraption were discussed as early as the 13th century, when English philosopher Roger Bacon argued that a better understanding of the laws and properties of nature could foster inventions and “incredibly fast conveyances that could move independent of animal power.” Similar claims and subsequent inventions would later be made in Renaissance Italy and in 17th-century China. Several attempts to replace animal power with other means of propulsion would be made in the following centuries. But it would take until the first half of the 19th century before self-propelled vehicles—powered by a variety of technologies—would finally arrive on the scene.

By that time, several technological advances had been made in the field of self-propelled vehicles. The new, experimental machines were mostly fitted with steam- and gasoline-powered engines, but electric power sources were also used in these early automotive experiments. Ultimately, the high manufacturing and operational costs of the electric motor would phase out the idea of battery-powered transportation. Steam engines, although widely used from the late 18th century as a power source for both industrial production as well as transportation, required large quantities of water and combustible material to constantly feed the burners to heat the water and create steam pressure. In comparison, the four-stroke gasoline-powered internal combustion engine was far superior, both in performance and durability as well as in cost-effectiveness, and so the internal combustion engine won the race, and the technology would power vehicles for the coming century. Few expected the electric motorcar to be revived one hundred years later—at the expense of its former rival.

Early designs for internal combustion engines were perfected in Germany and France. Notable early designers were Belgian mechanic Étienne Lenoir—credited with developing the first commercially successful gasoline engine around 1860—and German engineers Gottlieb Daimler and Wilhelm Maybach, who developed what would become the prototype for the modern automobile engine. In the early years of the automobile age, in the late 19th century, France was the absolute center of gravity for the newly developed motorcar. Revolutionary designs of both engines and

carriages originated with French pioneers like René Panhard, Émile Levassor, Jules-Albert de Dion-Bouton, and Armand Peugeot. The exceptionally well-developed French road network (a legacy of the 18th century, during which road development for military purposes was encouraged and subsidized by the French state), enabled the rapid growth of car culture. French automobile manufacturing grew exponentially at the turn of the century, from a relatively modest production total of 320 cars in 1896, to an incredible 16,900 in 1904, putting France at the top of European automotive industry. The French domination in automobile manufacturing was short-lived, however, and by 1908 the growth rate of the US, British, and German automotive industries surpassed that of the French.

The new mobility mode was still far from widespread in the early years of the 20th century. Automobiles were expensive gadgets, providing mainly well-off citizens with an exciting new leisure activity. This upper-class market would soon be saturated, so a broader target audience needed to be catered for. Due to revolutionary mass-production methods first applied by Henry Ford in 1913 with the development of the moving assembly line, production cost and retail price dropped significantly and—in the USA at least—the car became affordable for ordinary people by the 1910s. In 1912, the most popular US-made car—the Ford Model T—could be purchased for around \$600, which amounted to roughly the average US annual wage. By 1927, the retail price for a Ford Model T had dropped to around \$360–\$545 (depending on the version). That same year, in the USA there was one car for every 5.3 inhabitants. These numbers were in stark contrast to the car/population ratios of European nations in the same period, with, for example, one car for every 44 inhabitants in France, and one car for every 196 inhabitants in Germany. In Europe, the conversion from animal-powered transportation to motorized transportation would happen gradually after World War I, and cars would become widely integrated into European daily life only after World War II. Global car production and ownership would skyrocket from the 1950s onward. By that time, however, a huge discrepancy existed in cars per capita between the USA and the rest of the world. In 1914, there were 18 cars per 1000 people in the USA; in Western Europe, the ratio was nine cars per 1000 inhabitants. By 1949, the ratio in the USA had risen to 300 cars per 1,000, while in Western Europe there were still “only” 204 cars per 1,000 inhabitants. The total number of cars worldwide continued to rise exponentially throughout the 20th century and into the next, but the global unequal distribution of vehicles remains. By 2019, the number of cars per 1,000 inhabitants had risen to 842 in the USA, versus 629 in Western Europe. In the same year, the average for the whole of the African continent amounted to a mere 41 cars per 1,000 inhabitants, while in Asia and the Far East the ratio was 126 cars per 1,000.

RISE OF THE CAR CULTURE AND EARLY GASOLINE DISTRIBUTION

Despite the technological ingenuity of the internal combustion engine, its performance was entirely dependent on various external factors: well-maintained smooth roads, rubber tires, and regular mechanical maintenance, to list but a few. But, most importantly, the motorcar would be dependent on its primary source of power: gasoline. Just as its early competitor, the steam engine, needed coal and water in (very) large quantities on a regular basis, the motorcar had to be refueled sooner rather than later. Before the explosion of the automotive industry, gasoline was seen as the useless by-product of crude oil refining through which kerosene was obtained. Unlike gasoline, kerosene was widely used, primarily for home-lighting purposes and cooking stoves. After refining, every barrel of crude oil produced no less than forty percent of the “useless” gasoline, and only three percent of the sought-after kerosene.

It is no coincidence that the success of the internal combustion engine and its triumph over other automotive technologies materialized simultaneously with the discovery of major oil wells in the USA at the dawn of the 20th century. Providing an abundant and cheap fuel to power this new technological wonder, the budding American oil industry had found a perfect partner in the emerging automotive industry, leading the USA—and the world—into the oil age.

Early motorists could not just stop at purpose-built gas stations of the kind we know today—these did not become operational until the 1910s. Before that time, cars could be refueled at bulk outlets, where large quantities of gasoline were stored in above-ground tanks. Relying on the force of gravity to funnel the—highly flammable—liquid into the car’s gas tank, filling station employees would serve one customer at a time. By 1905, mechanized, manually operated gasoline pumps were in use. Besides fuel, these early filling stations would sometimes sell the various lubricants needed to maintain cars. The sale of auxiliary automobile maintenance products (oils, batteries, tires) would become an increasingly important part of gas station revenue in the following decades.

Driven by integrated production methods, US car manufacturing boomed on the eve of World War I. The combined Ford assembly plants reached an annual production of 200,000-plus vehicles by 1913, all but reaching the one million mark by 1919. Total US car production in that same year amounted to 1.4 million cars. Obviously, all these automobiles needed a constant supply of the precious fuel liquid, resulting in a rapid professionalization of the fuel distribution market. In 1914, the Standard Oil of California company became the first large oil corporation to set up a chain of (more or less) standardized filling stations on the US West Coast. To capitalize maximally on the booming automobile market, many filling stations offered additional automobile-related services such as the sale of lubricants and oil, tires, batteries, and even car-washing services and light mechanical maintenance. The prototype of the later “rest stop” was born.

In Europe, the automotive market in the early 20th century revolved around luxury brands, and production was significantly lower than in the USA. High-efficiency production methods were only slowly introduced from the 1920s, so the widespread adaptation of automobility would happen at least a decade later (depending on the country) than in the USA. The economic crisis of the 1930s would see the demise of many small-scale European luxury car manufacturers, and so, despite heavy import taxes on foreign cars, the European market would be flooded with US-made cars—or at least automobile parts, which were then assembled in Europe to avoid import taxes.

In accordance with their differing car sales volumes, fuel distribution and the evolution of the gas station concept in Europe happened at a considerably slower pace than in the USA. Curbside fuel pumps were in use much longer in European cities, and branded, look-alike gas stations would only slowly appear in Western Europe in the mid-1930s. It would take until the 1950s for the concept of identical branded gas stations to be implemented across the major oil corporations’ European sales territories.

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Caltex gas station, The Hague (the Netherlands),
1961 (Haags Gemeentearchief).

TOWARD A NEW CONCEPT: THE BRANDED GAS STATION

nitially, in the early years of the 20th century, gasoline distribution in the USA was an added service provided by already existing businesses, with gas pumps installed on the curb in front of general stores, automotive repair shops, or even bars and hotels. Likewise in Europe—albeit more than a decade later—gas pumps were positioned in front of various commercial enterprises. When curbside pumps were banned in California in the 1920s (as they were deemed a dangerous nuisance, causing traffic jams in downtown areas), out of a necessity a new commercial concept arose: the dedicated gas station, with gasoline pumps and a store in a private enclosed area, off the streetside. In Europe—despite local bans from the 1950s onward—curbside pumps would persist until the 1960s (in the UK) or even 1970s (mainland Europe). Together with this new concept, a new architectural typology would materialize.

By the mid-1920s, the ever-increasing competition among oil companies rapidly led to a saturated fuel distribution market, forcing brands to distinguish themselves from competitors. In a market where resale margins were already tight, professionalized branding was needed. Various marketing techniques revolving around brand names and trademarks were developed to secure a sales territory and attract a brand-loyal customer base. Although petroleum brands certainly had made use of trademark names and logos from the early days of motoring, the 1920s and 1930s saw the oil companies' increasing emphasis on brand identity and recognizability. The concepts revolved around the idea of recognizability and quality assurance: buying branded fuel or oil products at a branded service station would give patrons the peace of mind and the certainty that they were buying quality goods with guaranteed optimal performance. A clearly recognizable brand identity, supported by signs and logos, would help consumers recognize their favorite oil brand as they traveled roads and motorways. Branding and visual identity exceeded the mere packaging of oil products and was equally visible in the physical architecture of the branded gas stations. Gas station buildings became the centerpiece of the whole marketing strategy, acting as iconic roadside beacons. Often, the gas stations were adorned with a towering signpost of some sort, attracting customers, and assuring that the speeding motorist could recognize the brand of oil on offer from afar.

During the American gas station boom years between the mid-1920s and the mid-1930s (again, a little later in Europe), makeshift “gas shacks” appeared everywhere along both the urban and rural roadside. The uncontrolled sprawl of these often nonbranded independent fuel resellers led to widespread protest from various groups like local chambers of commerce or municipal agencies, both in the USA and Europe. “Roadside beautification” schemes would be initiated, focusing not only on lining roads with flowers and trees or constructing new stone guard fences, bridges, and roadside shelters, but also persuading gas station owners to improve the visual appearance of their stations (“landmarks,

not trademarks”). The combined needs for gas station owners to distinguish themselves from competitors, and at the same time improve the visual appearance of their buildings, resulted in a wave of remarkable architectural experimentation. New designs spanned an arch between neoclassical styles (stations camouflaged as Greek temples), various revival styles (colonial style, Spanish mission style, Georgian style, etc.), and architectural exotism (“Chinese” pagodas and “Moorish” mosques). Other creative entrepreneurs resorted to a fascinating blend of vernacular novelty architecture, resulting in gas stations disguised as teapots, teepees, petroleum cans, or giant shells. Regional revivalist architecture was favored not only by small fuel resellers; large oil corporations, too, saw an opportunity to link up brand recognizability with standardization of design. Many of these designs were offered by manufacturers of prefabricated buildings, and different designs could either be selected from an existing catalog or be tailor-made to meet a company's requirements. The regional and novelty trend in gas station architecture was predominantly present in the USA, but in Europe, too, the combination of a need to stand apart and pressure from local beautification committees inspired station owners (and architects) to get creative. While the odd petrol can or barrel-shaped gas station did occasionally appear along roads in Europe, generally European gas stations were much more conservative in their design approach, shunning the “over-the-top” designs of some of their North American counterparts.

Just like the historically inspired gas station architecture of the prewar years, North American oil corporations based much of their branding strategy on evocations of historical events or figures: Mobil's logo, the red flying horse Pegasus was obviously rooted in ancient Greek mythology. American petrol company Conoco's signage was based around the silhouette of an 18th-century minuteman, referring to the early years of American independence. The Union Oil Company of California rebranded its gas stations as Union 76 in 1932—again a reference to the United States Declaration of Independence (but also to the octane rating of gasoline at the time). The shift toward a more forward-looking branding strategy in American gas station design came with the introduction of the art deco movement in the interwar period. The art deco style was favored by many large oil corporations and smaller entrepreneurs alike, and several remarkable art deco-inspired stations were built by Shell, Gulf, Conoco, and Standard Oil. Although popular for a short period of time, the style was quickly phased out during the Great Depression era because of its high construction cost. It was time for a new fresh and modern design with an almost futuristic, forward-looking appearance that would help people move past the tough times and into the future.

THE GAS STATION AS A MODERNIST STATEMENT

By the time car culture was widely adopted on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1930s, modernist architecture had already firmly established itself within building practice. Drawing from the functionalist design ideas of, among others, Walter Gropius's Bauhaus and architects Robert Mallet-Stevens and Le Corbusier, gas station architecture from the late interwar and postwar period emphasized structure and program, reducing aesthetics to a by-product of the former. In doing so, modernist gas station architecture positioned itself as diametrically opposed to the ideas of the beautification-era architects, for whom lavish decoration was key. With its limited architectural program and status as a commercial nonplace, where customers would spend only a very limited amount of time, the gas station concept lent itself particularly well to artistic architectural expression. After all, besides dispensing the fuel, the key purpose of the building was to attract customers—so it had to stand out.

The gas station concept quickly became a favored typology among modernist architects. Here, they could experiment with forms and materials, without the limitations imposed by a demanding residential program. Of course, this was a logical extension of the love affair many influential modernist architects—including architecture icons like Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier—had with the automobile as a symbol of modernity and progress, as they based entire urban planning schemes around car use as prime mode of transportation. Modern architecture and the gas station typology were a match made in heaven, and its practical and almost industrial approach to building practice ensured both brand recognizability and ease of construction in large numbers, while keeping costs to a minimum. At the same time, the slender, clean lines of the modernist designs and their extensive use of glass, steel, and reinforced concrete projected purity (of product) and a positive, forward-looking brand identity.

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In the USA, modernist architecture was very influential in gas station design. Inspired by the Bauhaus movement and the architectural theories of Le Corbusier of the mid-1920s, American industrial design pioneer Walter Dorwin Teague came up with a revolutionary concept in 1934 that would set the standard for gas station design for decades to come. Commissioned by Texaco to create a new look for its gas stations, Teague designed a streamlined, futuristic-looking modular building, using large glass facades and porcelain enamel panels for the exterior. This gas station concept was cheap to build in large numbers and easy to adapt to various added services (such as car maintenance and washing bays). The "oblong box," or "icebox," as the design would be aptly named, would be built by the thousands, across the USA and Europe, copied by several other oil companies during the 1940s and 1950s or used as a base template for their own designs. Teague's design was nothing short of revolutionary and would be implemented worldwide. It is interesting to see how—despite largely following the concept of the oblong box—many gas station owners adapted Teague's design to fit their own needs or preferences, adding structures and functions as they saw fit.

As many branded gas stations were privately owned, the owners were not always contractually obligated to follow a fixed station design and could add to the existing blueprint. If station owners did have to comply with the oil company's architectural standards, a variety of possible predesigned solutions could be chosen from. Several large oil corporations would issue catalogs of standardized service stations models, each fit for a certain location and purpose. From small, single-space kiosk-like designs, to large, multi-service compounds, including washing and maintenance bays, a store, waiting rooms, and restrooms, besides, of course, the actual filling station area. Along major highways, some service stations would even comprise bars, coffeehouses, or even restaurants. These gas station concepts would eventually evolve into the highway rest stop in the early 1950s.

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Germany, 1950s. Reinforced concrete and a so-called "mushroom-column" permitted the creation of large gas station canopies, without the need for multiple support columns (Alamy).



DECLINE

Despite the diversification in its commercial activities through the sale of tires, automotive batteries, and accessories, the modern rest stop would remain largely dependent on one sole commodity as its main source of income: gasoline. Like other major commodities, oil prices are primarily influenced by supply/demand, production cost, and market sentiment. But perhaps more than other commodities, oil production is regulated by a cartel of oil-producing nations and corporations. With demand for oil being continuously high and rising since the early 20th century, periodical crises in the supply-and-demand balance were to be expected. The first major crisis would appear right in the middle of the boom years of gas stations. When World War II broke out in Europe, gasoline was rationed and the military given priority to its use and supply. Gas rationing in the UK started in the very early days of the war, in 1939, and lasted until May 1950. UK customers were allowed only a certain amount of gasoline per vehicle, prices were fixed, and payment was made in the form of coupons. In Europe, gasoline sales grinded to a halt in the occupied countries. Once the USA entered the war, gasoline was also rationed in that country, too—from 1942 to 1945—reducing the total amount of gas consumed from highway use in the USA to thirty-two percent. Obviously, this had serious consequences for gas stations owners, certainly the independent ones. But with World War II over, the US economy would take off, and the amount of gas stations in the USA and Europe would continue to rise until well into the 1960s. The year 1956 saw another oil crisis, when the then Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the administration of the Suez Canal, a vital artery in the world's oil supply chain. 1973 saw the most important of the oil crises following the OPEC oil embargo, resulting in gasoline rationing and a (voluntary) ban on gas sales on Saturday nights and Sundays in the USA. In Europe, many countries introduced rationing because of supply issues, while other countries such as France and the UK received almost uninterrupted oil supplies.

The successive oil crises, market saturation, increasing vehicle fuel efficiency, the arrival of self-service stations (the first one opening in Los Angeles as early as 1947), and increased infrastructure regulations meant the number of independently owned gas stations across the Western world declined rapidly in the last decades of the 20th century.

In gas station architecture, too, a crisis of sorts had settled in. As profit margins in the fuel retail business declined due to the factors mentioned above, gas stations operators—large and small—had to cut costs to keep afloat. As the optimism and faith in the future of the 1950s and 1960s gradually made way for a more sober outlook in Western society, so did the visual appeal and level of service of gas stations.

Attractive gas stations with an extended range of services were generally more expensive to maintain than simple structures providing only filling services, and so the colorful and appealing midcentury gas station architecture was gradually replaced by the most basic and cost-effective form available: a forecourt with a few self-service gas pumps, covered by a steel-framed canopy. In a way, the archetype of the gas station had resurfaced. Although regional differences occurred, a decline in full-service gas stations in favor of stations supplying filling services only became apparent from the late 1960s onward. With self-service stations gradually becoming the norm both in the USA and Europe, the days of helpful gas station attendants making sure your windscreen got wiped and your tire pressure was checked were all but gone. When stricter environmental regulations were imposed on gas stations in the 1990s, many independent gas station owners could or would not bring themselves to invest in expensive new storage systems and pumps, and many would call it quits. Only the very large multinational oil corporations remained, reducing a once colorful and multifaceted gas stations landscape to a dull, uniform chain of fuel outlets, with identical shapes and forms, from Sidney to Anchorage.

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War-ravaged Esso gas station. the Netherlands, 1945.
(Nationaal Archief)