THE GREAT AMERICAN GAS STATION

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[Assignment: Find two buildings that aim to fulfill similar functions. Write a comparison and contrast of these two buildings or spaces in order to suggest why one is architecturally more successful than the other.]

(1) America is a country on the move. We have more cars, trucks, trains, and planes than any other nation. Our transportation is what holds us together. It directs our industry, commerce, and private lives. The personal aspect is perhaps the most important because transportation dominates our individual lives. We are all individuals possessing our own modes of movement—our cars. These vehicles are essential in getting to work or play. Before we go anywhere, however, there is a certain necessity that needs to be filled. The car needs fuel in its gas tank. So that’s where the gas station enters the picture.

(2) Since America has millions of cars, it has thousands of gas stations. There are usually three to four in every town and fifty or more in most large cities. As consumers, we have a choice of which station to purchase from. So why do people choose one over another? The price of fuel is the same at each location. (That is basic supply and demand.) What draws them across the line? Architecture is the answer.

(3) It can make or break a business. Architecture deals the cards with which the station owner plays. When well planned, the establishment makes a generous profit. When poorly designed, it dies a slow, painful death. The commercial building must attract its customers, not push them away. Its appeal is essential. The gas station’s architecture determines its success. (Remember, this is America. We define success as profit.)

(4) By looking back in history, we see how the industry has changed. The civilian automobile became common after World War II. People had more money and more cars. The commercial marketplace adapted to the needs by providing the gas station. It was the traditional service station that dominated the fifties, sixties, and seventies. The eighties gave birth to the contemporary gasoline multiplex. Evolution has led to the domination of the market by this new breed. It is better suited for today’s American drivers and their needs. The modern gas station is more successful than its older competition.

(5) The main reason why the modern gas station outperforms the preceding generation’s is the location. A lot of money is spent in site research for each building. Traffic surveys are conducted in order to find the ideal spot. Once the land is chosen, the designers must plan for the entrance and the exits. This is done to insure easy access. The super stations are found on
toll roads, interstates, state roads, and busy inter-city arteries where instant availability is necessary. More cars mean more business. More business means increased profit. It is therefore a better investment.

(6) The traditional station does not emphasize its location. It rests usually on a small town corner or a big city alleyway. Its purpose is to serve the surrounding village or neighborhood. (The modern station looks for commuters, tourists, and the locals.) The traditional station develops clientele from a small population. It relies on regular customers. Profit is small but consistent. Its location has cursed it to a life of minimal returns.

(7) After the location is chosen, the building must be designed. The rule of thumb that applies here is that form must follow function. The modern structure is very open and easily approached. There is plenty of parking and a multitude of pumps. These features can accommodate many patrons and their vehicles at any given time. The pumps are covered by canopies that block out the elements and allow for easy self-service. They are well lit, clean, and inviting. This openness is a characteristic that brings in business. People like having room for their cars. Pulling up to a pump ought to be a simple task, not an ordeal. After the gas is distributed by the modern digital-display pumps, the customer walks into the main building. Here he is greeted by the clerk at the front desk. Surrounding the attendant is a variety of items ranging from car care equipment to junk foods. This building is a complex gas station/convenience store. It’s designed so that the miniature market will help sell gasoline. The gas station’s sales increase, making the store feature a lucrative investment. Overall, the structure adds to the success of the business.

(8) The modern facility makes its profit from the drawing factors of availability and convenience. The traditional gas station is based on personal service. Its two or three pumps are manned by a "grease monkey" or a clerk who must also attend to the pumps. The car is checked and filled while the customer sits comfortably in the vehicle. The driver has no need to enter the building. Since the building isn’t a major draw, it is quite basic. There is usually a manager’s desk, a cash register station, and a garage-like work area. The area is dark and often dirty. Most people come here for the service, not the architecture. The building does not contribute to the success of the business.

(9) The building’s structure is directly related to its efficiency. Convenience is a key factor in designing all of today's commercial buildings. The gas station is no exception. In the modern station, a customer can be in and out in minutes. The tank can be full of gas and the trunk full of groceries, if necessary. Time is money.
If you can get gas and food at the same place, why not save time and buy both? At the traditional station the workers are often slow. They check under the hood and inspect the hoses. Many car owners have warranties that protect and service the vehicles free. They don’t need this attention. They just need speedy service. Since America is so fast paced these days, the traditional station has worn out its use in the sale of gasoline. The modern station has taken over.

(10) In conclusion, convenience, efficiency, and speed are the key determinants used in the design of a gas station. If any one building possesses these three characteristics, it has a good chance at making a profit. If it does make a profit, then the building is a success. In the battle between the new and the old, it is clear that the new has won.