



all the pretty truck stops

An upscale prototype redefines the roadside facility—complete with imported marble shower stalls.

By Julie Taraska
Photography by François Robert

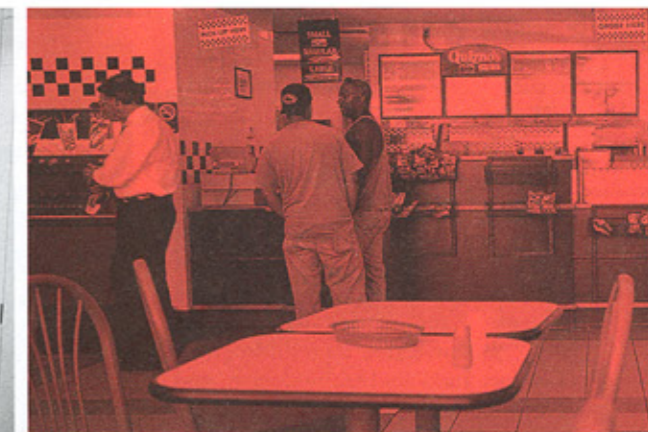
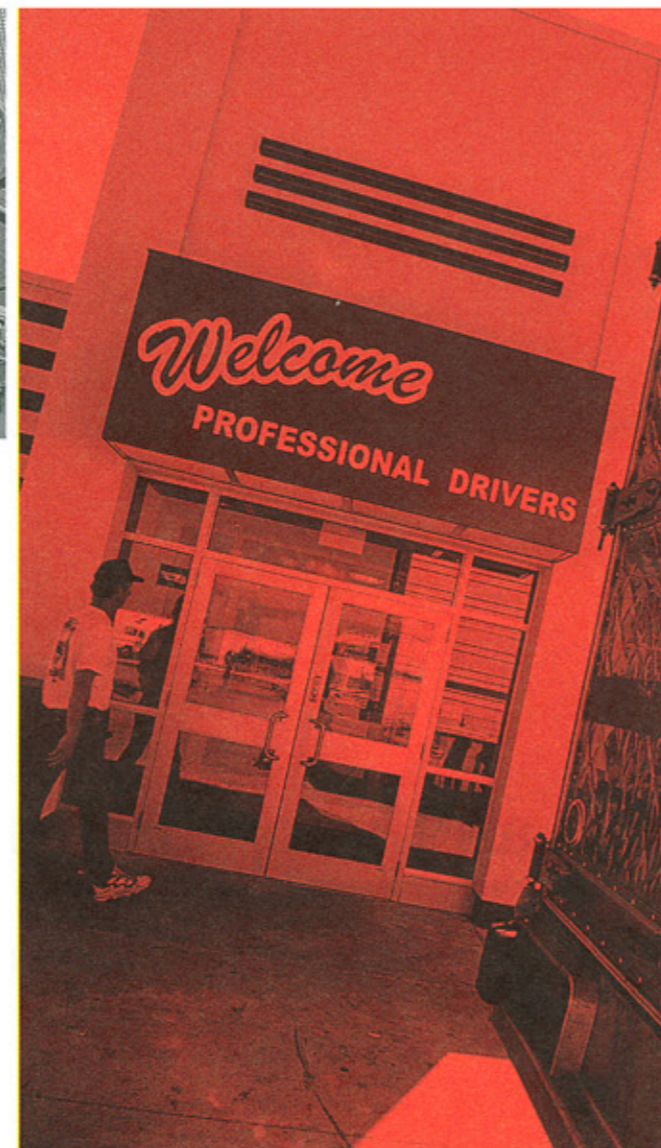
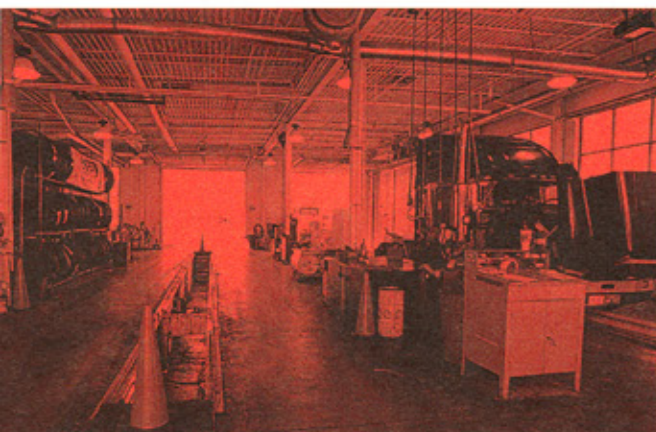
It's a rare truck stop where you can see the driver of an 18-wheeler breaking bread with a soccer mom, let alone with her kids, who have piled out of the SUV. But architect Paul Westlake has created a place where these two types of motorists—travelers and truckers—might meet. With TravelCenters of America's (TA) prototype facility in Commerce City, Colorado, Westlake has transformed the truck stop—that dank, all-male domain scented with sweat, cigarettes, and diesel fuel—into a haven that attracts both families and drivers of big rigs.

"There are long waiting lists to get into those showers," he says, referring to the truck stop's double-width stalls that, like the rest of the bathroom facilities, are modeled after those found at Ritz-Carlton hotels. Available to truckers and vacationing motorists alike, the showers are constructed of *rojo alicante* marble from Spain; they open onto lounges and shaving rooms, and they all boast Corian sinks and brilliantly lit expanses of mirrors. Charcoal-gray Dex-O-Tex, a rubberized nonslip material used in hospital operating rooms, covers the floors; it is laid without seams to discourage the growth of mildew. These are bathrooms better than the ones at most European hotels, and they're emblematic of Westlake's desire to debunk the truck stop stereotype with TA's \$10 million, 30,000-square-foot prototype.

The impetus for the overhaul, the first major redesign of an American truck stop in 80-odd years, is economic. In the Seventies and Eighties, during the heyday of interstate construction, chains like TA—then known



Rigged: Catchy awnings, above, entice vacationers and truckers alike to sit down to a real meal while their vehicles are repaired in service centers, below left. A separate entrance, below right, caters to truckers but leads to a light-filled atrium, below center, shared by families playing video games. Elements of the Ritz on the road include shower stalls in imported marble, opposite left, and a posh food court, opposite center.



as Truckstops of America—put little effort into developing their holdings. There was no need: Profit margins on fuel were high, while market competition was low. More recently, however, as diesel margins have declined, travel centers have had to invent new ways to shore up their businesses. One approach, embraced by chains across the U.S., has been to offer truckers personal amenities such as laundry services and high-speed Internet hookups, Jacuzzis and massage therapists.

But TA has gone one better. The company asked Westlake, a principal of the Cleveland-based firm van Dijk Pace Westlake, to design a travel center that would also appeal to vacationing motorists.

After all, a 1995 study commissioned by NATSO (the National Association of Truck Stop Operators) found that if just 1 percent of rural auto traffic was diverted to travel centers, the result would be an extra \$300 million annually for the \$37 billion-a-year industry. In addition, research suggests that motorists have more occupants per vehicle, stop more often, make more purchases per stop, and have a higher disposable income than truckers do.

To usher in this physical—and psychological—shift from truck stop to travel stop, as well as to achieve the 50-50 split between professional drivers and motorists that TA's owner, the Wall Street investment firm the Clipper Group, was aiming for, TA initiated an open search. It sought out an architect "who had never designed a travel center before and who

Westlake hopes to embed a chromed 18-wheeler in a future TA truck stop facade to function as a playland for children. "It would not only be an interesting physical thing," he says of the modified rig, "but it would also be symbolic of the relationship we were looking for—and the interaction we were hoping to bring about between trucker and motorist."

would come with no preconceived notions," says Michael O'Connor, TA's director of advertising and public relations. Van Dijk Pace Westlake, a full-service firm specializing in historical preservation, cultural centers, and health-care facilities, was chosen on the strength of its portfolio alone. For the non-truck stop truck stop, Westlake had no working model. "It wasn't like a town hall or fire station, [where] you could run down the street, find one, and modify it," he says. "You had to design this building from ground zero."

When he began researching, the architect quickly realized that his varied clientele were rather similar in their roadside desires. "We did surveys," Westlake says, "and we found that truckers' and motorists' needs really weren't that different. They were doing different things during the day, driving different vehicles, but what they wanted was the same: a place that was convenient, clean, and exciting." But to create that place, one that he felt should offer lots of air and light, Westlake had to decide which facilities could be shared by the two types of drivers. Over the period of a year, he visited nearly 100 travel plazas across the U.S. and considered feedback from trucking-fleet directors, vacationing motorists, and professional drivers.

The surprising finding was that little, aside from entrances, exits, and parking lots, needed to be segregated. Two entryways to the facility were built—a glitzy one at the building's front to entice motorists, and a more

staid one in the back for professional drivers; that way each group could have quicker access to its fueling stations. An open hallway was put in to connect the front of the facility, where motorists tend to confine themselves, with the back of the truckers' area. Restrooms and a video game arcade were placed off the passageway, which now serves as a gentle transition between the sections.

Cars and RVs were also given different parking lots and exits from the 18-wheelers, because, according to O'Connor, most motorists aren't skilled at navigating in close quarters with the big rigs. Different flow patterns would reduce the number of accidents in the lot, a problem that plagues many travel centers.

To encourage professional drivers to stop at the prototype, Westlake emphasized the facility's truck-maintenance services. He carved huge windows into the outer truck bay, filling the space with a grid of glass blocks; when viewed from the highway, the blocks refract light, catching the eyes of passersby. On closer examination, truckers can see the rigs being worked on in the shop. "We used a lot of light in [the servicing area], so the truck can be celebrated like an object in retail—something you would buy, almost," says Westlake. The 14-foot-high doors of the three servicing bays were also made of glass, to demystify what occurs inside. Being able to see the trucks, Westlake believes, "communicates the importance the center puts on service. Repair and continued on page 153

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maintenance are not something you hide behind a concrete wall but something you celebrate.”

Motorists are baited with other product and food options. As they approach the facility, a 42-foot white pylon tagged with TA's red-and-blue logo becomes visible. Conceived by Karen Skunta, a Cleveland-based graphic designer whose past projects have included Web and print projects for Case Western Reserve University, the sign is made of plastic and metal and is lit internally. It advertises the nationally known food franchises that can be found at the facility, like Popeye's Chicken & Biscuits and Pizza Hut Express.

Its shape also plays off the curved motifs of the convenience store that's located directly below it and is another visual draw near the motorists' entrance. The store features a panoramic window made of glass that is thicker at the top and nearly opaque at eye level. Because TA's market research found a direct correlation between how well-lit a facility is and how many people stopped at it, Westlake chose enormous HID (high-intensity dif-fused) lights. When these artificial lights are combined with natural sunlight filtering through the window, the barrel-shaped structure becomes so bright that “you probably could perform surgery in there,” according to O'Connor.

Westlake, who refers to the ploy as “the moth to the lightbulb effect,” also used some retail techniques to flatter the items for sale in the shop, which range from potato chips and coolers to detergents and souvenirs. (A second, more trucker-oriented store is located in the building's rear, near the servicing bay.) Bow-string trusses and perforated metal scrims hang from the ceiling and draw travelers' attention to impulse items near the pay points. A deli and a coffee bar offer quick-stop options.

But for those who need a more old-fashioned incentive to pull over, there's an oversize (yet quaint) beacon visible from the road: a 27-foot-high red-and-white striped awning that heralds the facility's 24-hour, full-service Country Pride restaurant. Westlake, who dubs the exaggerated structure “the awning that ate the diner,” intended it as an unmistakable tip-off that there's food served within. Furthering the reference, he covered the restaurant with the sort of corrugated aluminum that diners had in the Fifties. “Without putting a sign on it that says ‘Eat Here,’” he says, “the materials and awning communicate to Americans that this is a place for food.”

And food is the area where truckers and motorists differ most. Professional drivers, says O'Connor, “often eat two meals a day, one sit-down, one deli or fast food. They stock their cool- continued on page 155

Bertoia
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Bucquet
Chareau
Le Corbusier
Desky
Fortuny
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Loos
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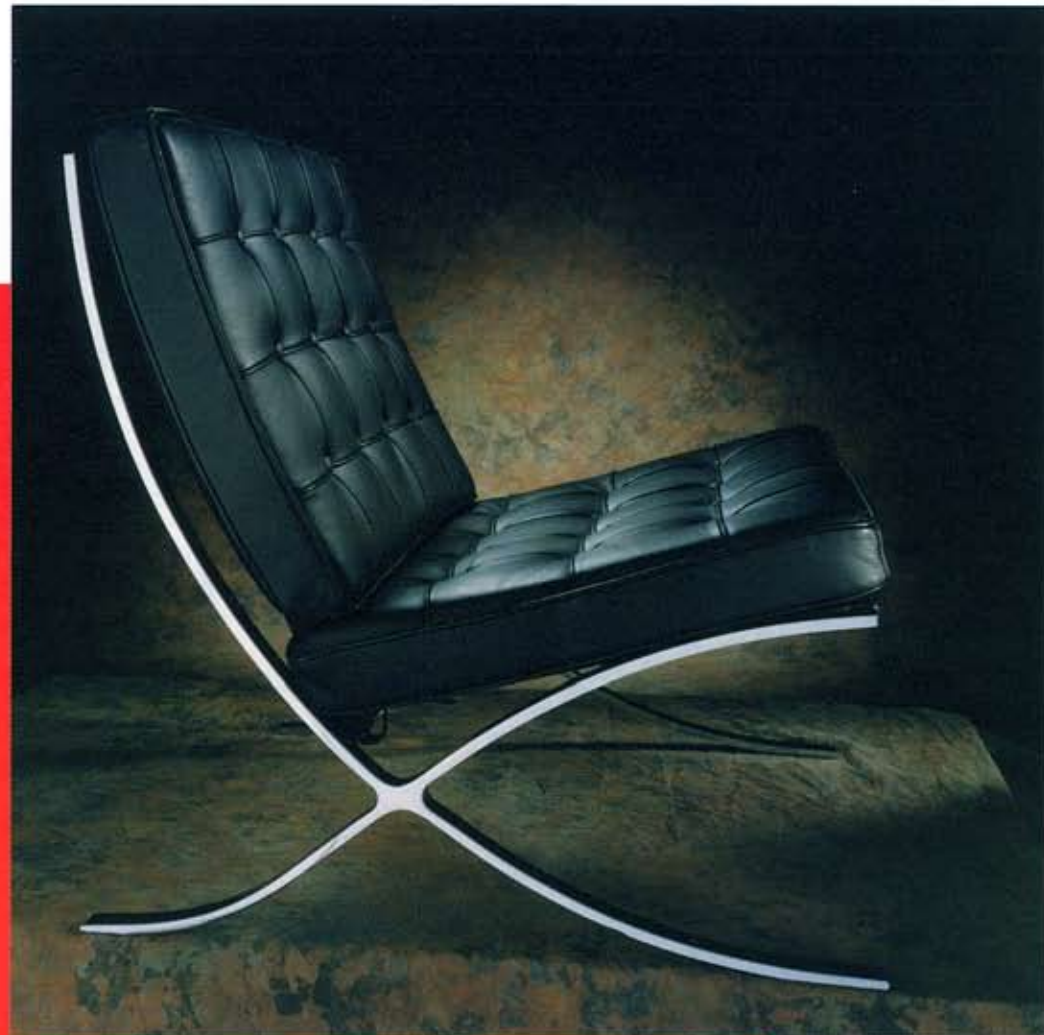
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ers and plan ahead, frequently preparing things before they get on the road." Vacationing motorists, on the other hand, are more likely to rely on stopping for sustenance. To satisfy both groups' needs, the prototype includes a 46-seat fast-food court.

One idea for the food court that TA decided not to pursue, but which Westlake hopes will be implemented in a future truck stop, is to embed a chromed 18-wheeler in the facade to function as a playland for children. "It would not only be an interesting physical thing," he says of the modified rig, "but it would also be symbolic of the relationship we were looking for—and the interaction we were hoping to bring about—between trucker and motorist. It's kind of hard to get close to truckers' machines. You have 250 trucks parked in a huge lot, but they're not accessible. That's not really a place for children to wander."

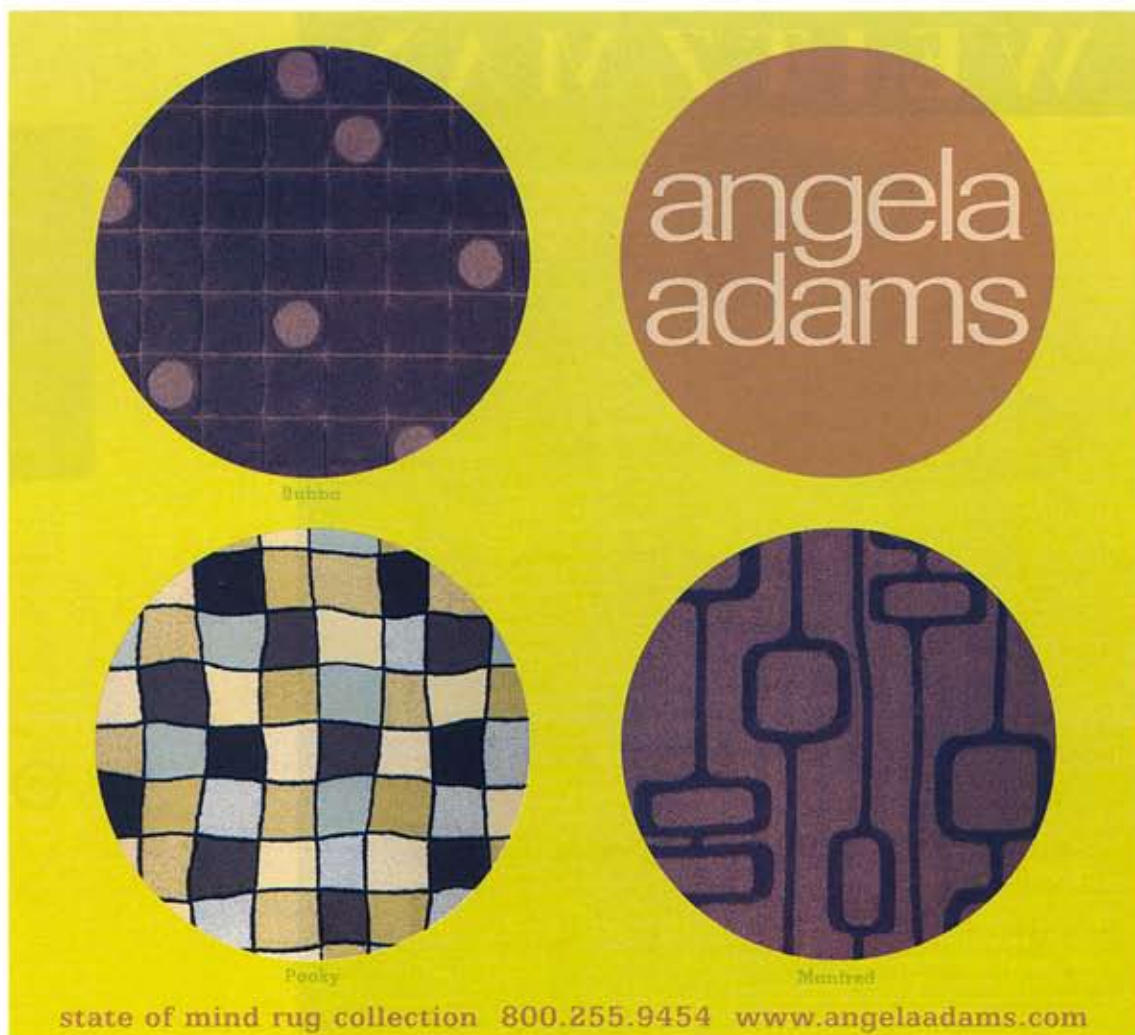
While championing the truck, Westlake has also remembered to pamper its drivers. In addition to the rig-servicing area, there's a truckers-only laundry service, business center, shaving room, and lounge, the latter with wide-screen TV and movie-theater-style seating.

In addition, Westlake has utilized the latest technological conveniences for truckers. Among these are ProntoPay, an automation system that offers shortcuts on professional drivers' fueling paperwork, and Park 'N View, a service that turns a truck cab into a hotel room, complete with 24-hour Internet and phone access, TV service, and wake-up calls.

TA, which now has 162 locations in 40 states, plans to have 300 outposts by 2005. The company is currently constructing three prototypes in Texas—in Amarillo, Dallas, and San Antonio—as well as one in Cartersville, Georgia. The first "protolite" (a smaller version of the prototype) will debut this month in Florence, Kentucky. One hundred of the protolite facilities will be built in the next five years across the U.S.

For Westlake, whose previous projects include the Phoenix Opera House and several estates for former presidents, the TA prototype was a "fun" commission. In fact, when he and some colleagues were in Denver on business recently, they stopped by the facility and pumped quarters into the video games.

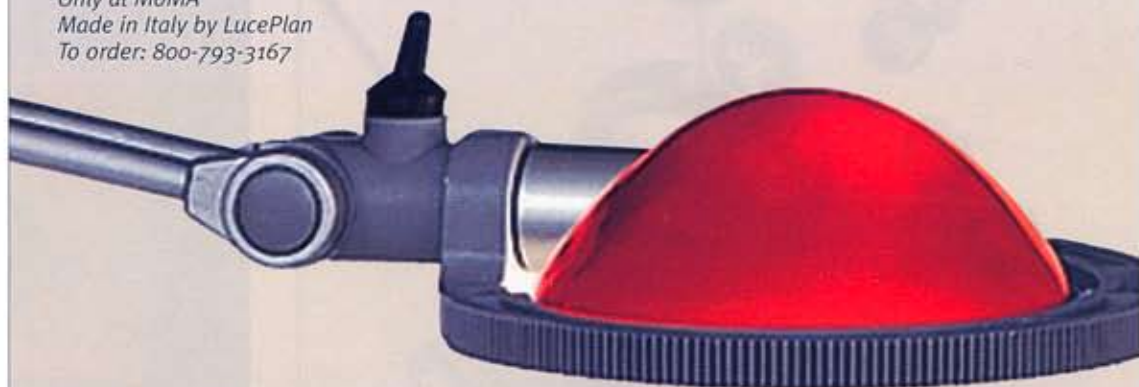
The architect won't speculate on whether the truck stop will eventually eclipse the Holiday Inn as a resting place for the budget-minded road traveler. However, he does think the TA prototype sends a comforting, welcoming message to its clientele—truckers and motorists alike. "The impression is that somebody is really taking care of us," he says. "It's a special place. A place where somebody really wants us to be." □



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