

The fall and rise of Main Street

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE MAY 30, 1976

Main Street—as American as apple pie; a stage set by Sinclair Lewis frozen in time and cultural mythology. Four-story brick fronts; shops below, offices above. The drugstore, the quick lunch, the five-and-ten, the movie theater. Eternal, unchanging middle America.

Small town or big city; weekly Rotary and Chamber of Commerce brown-gravy lunches at the local hotel. Hanging out; the last picture show. The street-corner ennui of vacuous Saturday nights and long summer afternoons from which millions have fled; the illusion of a simpler, better world to which millions have returned. Main Street is the American way of life.

But Main Street has proved no more stable or invulnerable to change than any other part of the urban environment. It has had its own life cycle. In the 1950's, downtown declined. The suburban explosion and the marketing revolution after World War II dealt it a lethal blow.

A mobile society that had established a new set of rituals focused on the drive-in anything, transferred the Saturday-night rite of passage to the “climate controlled” covered shopping mall in all of its frigid, canned-music-drenched, plastic glamour. On old streets, old buildings were torn down for parking lots, in a bleak, gap-toothed kind of mutilation. Main Street had become a sad, shabby relic, empty shopfronts alternating with faded displays that looked as if time had stopped on one of those 1940's summer afternoons.

The ultimate irony came, as it often does, with the passage of time. Declared dead, Main Street refused to die. The country has entered on a unique nostalgia kick and Main Street was ripe for remembrance and revival. It was suddenly high camp. The architectural avant-garde rediscovered it and enshrined its neon archaisms. The architectural historians gave status to its 19th-century styles.

Preservationists fought for it. Recycling its buildings has become fashionable and profitable. The Venturis, gurus of the Pop environment, announced that “Main Street is almost right.”

The Main Street renaissance is significant esthetic and economic history. Its new vitality can be looked on as a radical change in the American perception of the urban scene. The shift to restoration came out of disillusionment with the results of urban renewal, with its emphasis on demolition and new construction, a growing awareness of the effect of the loss of the past, combined with new approaches to planning and to economic revitalization.

An “elitist” interest in environmental character and the commercial self-interest of Main Street merchants were suddenly found to be the same thing.

Main Street U.S.A. is essentially a 19th-century phenomenon; its prosperity and vitality were intensified as towns and cities grew. Falsefront, wood-framed frontier streets developed into solid brick and stone mercantile avenues. The street was pedestrian in scale, geared to the horse and buggy and the family enterprise. Its style was solidly Victorian. There were those Jones Blocks and Brown Blocks and Smith Buildings of pressed red brick with General Grant trim, their dates proudly centered in bracketed and pedimented cornices. Ornate cast-iron-fronted structures borrowed Roman and Venetian references for elaborate and handsome “palaces of trade.” A common commercial vernacular tied together anything from Georgian and Greek Revival to High Victorian Gothic. A sequence of fashionable facades became the unified 19th-century blockfront.

These pleasantly scaled blocks displayed a steady rhythm of curved or simply pedimented windows, loosely labeled “Renaissance,” varied yet unified by good proportionate relations. Increasingly large glass fronts in the ground-floor stores reflected American progress in plateglass manufacture. The range was from sophisticated to provincial and it was, in the American tradition, largely speculative construction. But this was sound building that served its purpose with character, humanity and style.

When the automobile opened the countryside and carried people and businesses away, it clogged old streets and devoured parking space and destroyed the accustomed way of doing things. Property owners and merchandisers sought desperately for remedies. Because the watchword of the American competitive business ethic has always been “modernize,” they embarked on an orny of remodeling.

O modernization, what crimes are committed in thy name! The 1950's was a period of wholesale destruction. The debacle was aided, abetted and accelerated by building-products manufacturers who promoted the use of plastic and metal panels for the total resurfacing of old buildings for a "new look." This had the curious advantage of deliberately reproducing the worst feature of the new shopping centers with which they were trying to compete: their total lack of architectural distinction.

It could be called the Hawneer syndrome, in honor of one of the more aggressive producers, or the Alcoa plague. Alcoa advertised archly: "What's so improbable about Alcoa Aluminum facelifting Main Street, U.S.A.? .. Tired old facades take on new beauty. . handsome aluminum panels add just the right touch. . . to rows of buildings too good to tear down but not much good as they stand." Workmen in the illustration cheerfully masked a respectable Victorian building with an architectural obscenity. Entire blocks of modestly elegant vintage architecture disappeared, covered with panels and grilles, plain and arid, waffled and corrugated, garish and humdrum. Fortunately, the old fronts were usually just concealed, not de

It didn't work, of course, because it failed to address the deeper problems of social and urban change and everyone went rushing off to the shopping center anyway. It had become the town center and the civic center for the new consumer culture.

But people are coming back to Main Street now, lured by a different kind of renewal. In an act of poetic, or architectural, justice, many of those prefab false fronts are being removed. In the mid-1960's, Columbus, Ind., asked the architect Alexander Girard to look at its old Washington Street buildings in terms of their architectural assets. Girard devised a clean-up, paint-up program that emphasized color and design and the stylistic identity of the struc

Almost spontaneously, other communities embarked on similar activities, and although the approach was basically cosmetic, it was the first step toward the more comprehensive concept of reuse. There were guidelines for color, signs and storefronts. Now there are firms—both profit and nonprofit—that specialize in giving this kind of advice to merchants and city planning boards. Sometimes the efforts err on the side of fauxWilliamsburg, but the point is that this is restoration, not destruction; it is a search for values as well as appearances.

Most important, it has been rediscovery. What has been rediscovered is the

streetscape, or the quality of the street environment and the buildings that it comprises. What is valued again is history, or a sense of identity and place, and architecture, an essential component of both.

The next step has been to put the renovated buildings into a more competitive, convenient and inviting context. Thus was the Main Street shopping mall born. The most successful renovation is carried out within the framework of a larger, more comprehensive renewal plan that links economic revitalization to an improvement in the quality of the environment. Restoration is now balanced with new construction and circulation and open — space patterns in programs of increasingly sophisticated and successful interrelationships.

The results are showing in cities and towns too numerous to list. It is working as well in Muskegon, Mich., as it is in Salem, Mass. Old buildings of character are treated as key elements of the new plans. The bulldozer and carpet-bagger planner are almost obsolete.

There are many methods of revival: studies and development plans done through city agencies and private groups, often working together, bootstrap renewal through individual preservation efforts, enlightened developer initiative, and even special district designation.

Paterson, N.J., has a oneblock restoration that has been referred to as the brandold Lower Main Street Mall. Most of these Fair Street buildings were typical 19thcentury commercial structures housing shabby food shops (the ethnic kind prized in chic neighborhoods) that have now been carefully restored by the firm of Beyer, Blinder, Belle. In Allentown, Pa., \$5 million in state and city funds have turned Hamilton Street into the four-block, half-mile Hamilton Mall, designed by Cope, Linder, Walmsley.

Market Street in Corning, N.Y., a city 60 percent destroyed by floods after Hurricane Agnes in 1972, is a demonstration project of the use of restoration and new construction. The architects in charge are Geddes, Brecher, Qualls, Cunningham, with John Milner of the National Heritage Corporation associated for restoration, aided by the helpful backing of Thomas Buechner of the Corning Glass Company_

There are some very special streets in American cities, long recognized as anchors of place and identity, that have suffered serious vicissitudes. They are coming back almost by spontaneous regeneration. Magazine Street in New Orleans is one—a potpourri of faded, offbeat pleasures and a derelict grandeur that runs six

miles from Canal Street in the business district to the river. Firaro, a lively local newspaper that should know, calls it the real New Orleans and describes its variety perfectly: “It slices through all kinds of things Orleanean: the warehouses and coffee plants, the seedy bars of the Irish Channel, the heart of the Latin community, the working–class neighborhoods.”

Long blocks are now a “miragelike” mix of restoration and neglect, antebellum lace–and–scroll woodwork and colonnades, Coca–Cola signs, washeterias, antique shops, shabby dwellings and fashionable enterprises. Take your choice of Uncle Bill's Pool Hall or Tucci's elegant restaurant; enjoy the balconied and arcaded, indigenous and irreplaceable architecture in casual, insouciant decay. But, make no mistake, Magazine Street is reviving.

Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn is the Magazine Street of New York. Its vernacular is the small red–brick row, and it, too, has become the place for the cognoscenti to find marginal antiques and special foods. Rundown and shabby, it still charms by revealing the architectural scale and style of the 19th century. Surrounded by restored brownstone neighborhoods, it is enjoying a commercial revival. New boutiques and restaurants enliven it; Middle Eastern shops supply the city with baklava, slab bread and

Because the environmental and architectural values of the street are an intrinsic part of its special atmosphere and services, New York has employed an unusual device—the special zoning district—to protect both its physical character and its existing amenities. The city's planners have established an Atlantic Avenue Special District, with zoning regulations designed to retain its scale and style.

The city's study found 109 19th–century buildings with 36 historic storefronts. Zoning guidelines direct their renovation and restoration and specify details of future construction. The original building materials, shop windows and fenestration of the historic structures must be kept. Old cornices must be preserved or replaced. Bulk and placement are controlled in new construction, encouraging low buildings following the existing street line, with generous storefronts and windows. To avoid spot–spoiling by parking lots, no demolition of a 19–century building is allowed unless it is unsafe and a permit for new construction has already been issued.

This country's waterfront streets have been a particularly evocative catalogue of history and style. In a move to save one of the last extant stands of this kind of riverfront architecture, Louisville, Ky., has declared its Main Street from Sixth to

Ninth a historic district. Admirable community commitment has included \$2.5 million in preservation funds. The Actors Theater is housed in an 1836 Greek Revival temple by Gideon Shryock, and the Junior League has come back downtown. So far so good.

But now the curious aim is to “recreate Main Street of 1874” and Louisville has entered the sticky trap of “restoring back.” It is opting for make-believe, or a cross between Williamsburg and Disneyland: printing presses will turn out the news of 100 years ago, craftsmen will make products of the time, there will be a mule-drawn streetcar, hitching posts, gas lamps and an assortment of quaint appurtenances.

“The possibilities are endless,” consultant Alfred Stern has pointed out. There is talk of illuminating buildings at night, each in turn, while recorded five-minute tapes recite “I am the Such-and-Such Building,” followed by a little first-person historical plug. Indeed, the possibilities are’ endless, alas.

Louisville should talk to Galveston, Tex. Galveston's Main Street, the Strand, once called the Wall Street of the Southwest, served the port city in the 19th century. Its outstanding collection of timeworn Victoriana, including ornate and elegant castiron is now listed on the National Register of Historic Sites.

The Strand is the subject of an exemplary study by the architectural firm of Venturi and Rauch for the Galveston Historical Foundation, funded by the Moody Foundation and the City Options program of the National Endowment for the Arts—a creative government approach to the identification and aid of fringe urban areas that has been a brilliant environmental undertaking. A marketing and economic analysis was made by Christopher J. Brown Associates and a Strand Planning Committee is in operation.

Bootstrap renewal has created an art center and galleries, studios, apartments and shops. The aim is “an artful but impressionistic restoration the total effect eclectic rather than pure. Juxtaposing the new and vital with the old and symbolic will help the Strand to become, not a museum, but a real place. . . an active multipurpose street.”

That is the whole point of the Main Street revival. The objective is not a stageset, historical “enclave.” Strong commercial activity, the restoration of use and vitality to downtown, are as important as the restoration of buildings. There has been an amazing degree of success, affecting both the main drag of small towns and the older streets of large cities, attesting to a commonality of aim and effort.

Because what has happened is that the perceived self-interest of businessmen has married the concerns of the preservationists and the urban environmentalists. Their ends have been found to be mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive.

Main Street is learning to build on its assets, rather than, to destroy them. It is not really competing with the shopping centers that will continue to serve suburbia; it is offering an attractive alternative. This amounts to an option, in a time of a growing "pluralism" of tastes and options, interesting enough so that local patronage is not automatically drawn away from downtown to the new centers. It is even worth coming to from other places as a different kind of experience. What is thrown up in a field overnight cannot compete with a century of style.

The financial formula of revitalization is beginning to work so well, in fact, and to look so good, that it is about to be corrupted. There is already the foisting upon gullible communities of packages of "amenities" and carnivalized pedestrianization with jazzy kiosks, planters and graphics, guaranteed to turn into grimy, alien clutter. (The downtown Washington, D.C., area in front of the National Portrait Gallery, for example, now scheduled for a pedestrian mall, should be treated with immense restraint.)

It is not gimmicks that are doing the job. It is a genuine breakthrough in a profitable combination of art, history and business that has united entrepreneurs, esthetes and a public increasingly responsive to the meaning and pleasure of place.

In Paterson, Fair Streets Caliris Coffee Store grinds custom blends, and Millers Fruits and Vegetables offers "unwrapped tomatoes and apples and peaches with a leaf or two still on the stems." Magazine Street, in the throes of a gentle boom, "retains its strangely Orleanean quality of subtropical decay. . . an almost atmospheric quality of benign decadence." In Galveston, "the huge moving freighters against ornamental Victorian buildings just a block away create a romantic aura unique among American cities."

No shopping center can make these statements. On Main Street, art and life have turned out to be the same thing.

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