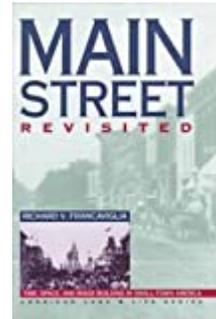


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Richard V. Francaviglia. *Main Street Revisited: Time, Space and Image Building in Small-Town America.* Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996. 256 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87745-543-1; \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87745-542-4.



Reviewed by William S. Nelligan (National Park Service)

Published on H-PCAACA (October, 1997)

In *Main Street Revisited*, Richard Francaviglia examines one of America's most cherished images through the material culture and artifacts left behind by architects, town developers, and image makers. The author is well-suited to the task having spent more than three decades tracing Walt Disney's Main Street USA to its roots in Marceline, Missouri and Fort Collins, Colorado.

For the purpose of this study, Francaviglia focuses on small towns with populations between 750 and 30,000 and defines Main Street as the downtown commercial area. The book is divided into three sections emphasizing the importance of time, space and popular image respectively. In the first section, Francaviglia examines the diverse origins and evolution of Main Street from residential and vernacular building forms to more formal public and commercial architectural styles. Here the author emphasizes the important roles that building materials, architectural styles, and economic circumstances played in development along Main Street. The importance of street plan, location, and physical space are discussed next. Using maps and photographs, Francaviglia lays out a methodology for reading Main Streets and identifying regional variations among the handful of fairly standard street and plat patterns.

In the final section on popular images, Francaviglia explores Main Street as a symbol of a shared American

experience. It is here that Francaviglia is at his best, interpreting Main Street as both a "real place, and as an expression of collectively shared or experienced assumptions, designs and myths" (p. xxii). Although he is studying and interpreting material culture, Francaviglia recognizes that it "is people who create and sustain both the material objects and the resultant images of place" (p. xxiv). Drawing on his Disney experience, Francaviglia examines the creation of perhaps the most enduring, albeit artificial, image of an American Main Street, namely Walt Disney's Main Street USA. The Disney story is fascinating a one, but Francaviglia may be overplaying the Disney hand. As a designed place Disney's Main Street USA is a success, but early town platters and later proponents of the City Beautiful movement designed highly influential places and spaces before Disney. Likewise, developers of early 20th century shopping centers, such as Country Club Plaza in Kansas City and Shaker Square in Cleveland, took advantage of the Main Street image to attract both businesses and customers and in the process created new Main Streets for their growing suburban communities. Like Disney, these early developers recognized the symbolic power of Main Street and its ability to provide a community with a sense of a place.

The marketing of Main Street attests to the strength of the Main Street ideal in American popular culture and

the power that common landscapes can obtain. Capitalizing on what Francaviglia describes as the shared mythology of Main Street, a place where the “honest merchant, the hardworking town-folk and an accessible community government are all found,” economic redevelopment programs such as the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Main Street Program have slowed and in many cases reversed the decline of small town Main Streets (p. xxiii). In other instances the redevelopment of old core business and industrial districts has created new Main Streets populated by trendy stores, gift shops, nightclubs, and assorted eating and drinking establishments. In the process Main Street has been transformed from a place where commodities were purchased to a commodity in its own right.

In closing, Francaviglia’s study brings to light one of the paradoxes of modern American life. While Americans may decry the loss of small town America and Main Street, they enjoy the suburban lifestyle; The privacy of a

fenced yard; The convenience of the strip malls and shopping malls and the bargains found at the large discount retailers. Many may find the demise of the old Main Street and the rise of the shopping mall lamentable, but it is a reflection of the changes driven by an increasingly suburbanized America. Rather than bemoan the change, Francaviglia urges us to “see them as part of the rich visual variety of the American landscape” (p. 188).

Overall, *Main Street Revisited* is an insightful and highly readable work. Differences about Disney’s influence aside, Francaviglia has contributed significant scholarship to a broader understanding of the importance of the American Main Street.

This review is copyrighted (c) 1997 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations. It may be reproduced electronically for educational or scholarly use. The Associations reserve print rights and permissions. (Contact: P.C.Rollins at the following electronic address: Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-pcaaca>

Citation: William S. Nelligan. Review of Francaviglia, Richard V., *Main Street Revisited: Time, Space and Image Building in Small-Town America*. H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. October, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1362>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact P.C. Rollins at Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu or the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.