

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and
Social Sciences

Great Plains Studies, Center for

May 1997

Review of *Main Street Revisited: Time, Space, and Image Building in Small-Town America* by Richard V. Francaviglia

Elizabeth Skidmore Sasser
Texas Tech University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Skidmore Sasser, Elizabeth, "Review of *Main Street Revisited: Time, Space, and Image Building in Small-Town America* by Richard V. Francaviglia" (1997). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 322.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/322>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Main Street Revisited: Time, Space, and Image Building in Small-Town America. Richard V. Francaviglia. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996. xxiv+224 pp. Photos, illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$17.95 paper (ISBN 0-87745-543-0).

In this excellent and unusual book, Richard Francaviglia traces the evolution of Main Street in America's small towns, examining patterns of growth, decay, and revitalization within the framework of Time, Space, and Image. No absolute "time frame" is offered, but an 1840s streetscape of London, Ohio, reproduced from *Howe's History of Ohio*, suggests a beginning date. Period illustrations and carefully chosen black and white photographs direct the reader on a 150 year journey to the present.

A discussion of the development of commercial establishments along the main thoroughfare begins with residential architecture. Ground floors were occupied by shops and tradesmen, while families lived in the upper levels. Residences often in Classic Revival style were gradually replaced by businesses and shops housed behind facades burgeoning with Victorian profusion. Francaviglia calls the late nineteenth-century store front the "first truly national building form in the history of American architecture." Nationalism did not eliminate ethnic characteristics imprinted on main streets across America. The use of regional building materials—brick, stone, wood, adobe—contributed to local identities, though this diminished with the onrush of railroads supplying all parts of the country with shipments of sheet glass, and iron and steel mass produced at distant manufacturing centers. In the twentieth century from the shores of the Atlantic to the Pacific, standardized aluminum siding and glass transformed store fronts, producing a dreary sameness. Large windows and signage visible to cars whizzing past advertised services and merchandise. The age of speed was altering concepts of both time and space.

Space helped to dictate Main Street's patterns of growth and expansion. Regional topography was important in site selection. If a river cut through a valley, it was profitable for Main Street to parallel the water route which brought trade and transport. For the same reasons, the principle street was often aligned with railroad tracks which brought goods and newcomers who wished to settle in the region, thus improving the town's economy. Main Street is frequently pictured as an open-ended expanding progression of commercial establishments with eye-catching nodal points—railroad stations and hotels, church steeples, or a courthouse dome. In some parts of the country, however, Main Street led to the town square or plaza. Wherever

located, Main Street was a space for people—a place for walking and window shopping, for watching parades, for community celebrations.

After the second World War, small town America and Main Street were left behind by the sprawl of super highways, super markets, and strip culture. The rehabilitation of this important part of Americana dominates the last portion of Francaviglia's book. The author identifies Main Street as a "National Icon" embedded in American folklore, literature, popular movies, and childhood memories. The construction of "Main Street USA" as a centerpiece for the first Disneyland illustrates the point emphatically. Inspired by Walt Disney's boyhood home in Marceline, Missouri, the fabrication's imagery recalls innocence, "family values," and a place where troubles "melt like lemon drops." When visitors carried this vision of an idyllic past home from California, they looked again at their own Main Streets.

But long before Disney created for Main Street an aura of magic and "unsullied youth," groups had begun to preserve regional history, settlement plans, and early architecture. The Ohio Historical Society's involvement with the re-creation of Ohio Village in Columbus is but one example. The National Trust for Historical Preservation in Washington, DC, also played a significant role in freeing the boarded up facades that lined forgotten Main Streets. Purists complain that Main Street reclaimed is often "more Victorian in appearance than it was during the Victorian period." In answer, Francaviglia points out that even this romanticized image has encouraged a livelier social and business climate by creating spaces "that concentrate populations and encourage merchants and customers to interact," as well as neighbors to become more neighborly. This infusion of fresh life into the heart of small towns preserves the historic fabric of a community and unites it with the present.

By no means adrift in the past, the author remarks of the present and future, "We might consider ourselves fortunate that we have so many options: preserved historic Main streets that offer character and charm, shopping centers or malls that offer climate controlled comfort in shopping, and also automobile-oriented strips that offer . . . services in a hurry." Who knows when these hapless evidences at the end of the twentieth century may be targeted as important preservation projects for future generations. **Elizabeth Skidmore Sasser**, *College of Architecture, Texas Tech University*.