

THE MAIN STREET APPROACH TO COMMUNITY DESIGN

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The historic preservation movement in the United States is perhaps most visible in the historic downtowns that are increasingly desirable as places to live, work, and recreate. The National Trust for Historic Preservation (the Trust)¹ has played a central role in this phenomenon by formulating a widely-emulated method for downtown revitalization known as the “Main Street approach.” Through this method, hundreds of communities have been empowered to address issues of disinvestment, decay, and ambivalence that have contributed to the decline of their downtowns by leveraging the power of historic resources and placemaking. The Main Street approach avails community volunteers a unique opportunity to envision and implement a wide variety of downtown design projects, from public art to streetscape redesigns and master plans. This chapter will explain how communities empower themselves through Main Street programs and the influence volunteers have over design projects that impact their downtowns. I will also discuss some of the controversial aspects of the approach, including charges of “Disneyfication” leveled against these programs and issues unique to volunteers in these programs, as well as the reasons why their efforts sometimes fail.

Much of the perspective that I offer in this chapter comes from my experience serving as the Main Street manager for Quakertown Alive!, an accredited Main Street program in Quakertown, Pennsylvania. As the second manager, I helped the program move from its inception to its growth phase. While I worked in the program in 2005 and 2006, I came to realize that there was a strong relationship between the overall success of a Main Street program and how closely the program followed the official guidelines published by the Trust. In Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Downtown Center (PDC), an accredited Main Street coordinating program, provided all of the official Main Street training in the state. While at Quakertown Alive!, I regularly attended PDC training sessions and yearly conferences and was able to meet many of the other Main Street managers and program

volunteers in the state. I also frequently attended the Trust's yearly National Main Streets Conference, which allowed me to share ideas with Main Street managers and volunteers from across the country. My experience serving on the board of the Old Allentown (Pennsylvania) Preservation Association, one of the country's first "Elm Street" programs,² helped me to better understand the relationship between residents' buy-in and the success of Main Street programs. In addition, my work as a design committee volunteer in Main Street programs in Washington State and Missouri provided insight in my future work coordinating the efforts of community volunteers.

Most published material on the Main Street approach and its programs is purely descriptive in nature and does not adequately address the complicated bi-causal relationship between successful Main Street programs and successful downtowns, as Kent Robertson (2004) found. Since the publication of Robertson's article, the situation has not changed substantially. Germane to the present inquiry, there also does not appear to be any refereed, published research on community design and the Main Street approach. As part of the official accreditation process for Main Street programs, the Trust's National Main Street Center requires programs to submit statistics on the amount of dollars spent on physical improvements, number of buildings rehabilitated, and the net gain in jobs and businesses in the Main Street program area every year.³ Proponents then use this data to defend the overall validity of the approach while leaving unanswered questions in terms of the relationship between individual statistics and specific Main Street program activities. Each program is free to define a method for how it collects these figures, which raises concerns of internal validity in the overall methodology used to collect this data.

Because of a lack of research that establishes a clear causal relationship and direction between the creation and growth of a Main Street program and the overall "success" of downtown revitalization, the validity of the Main Street approach is instead substantiated through the deep personal experience of those involved in the programs and tends to be accepted *prima facie* (Dane 1997). A study conducted for The Center for Rural Pennsylvania, which surveyed Main Street managers, did find a positive correlation between these managers' perceived self-effectiveness in implementing the officially sanctioned Main Street approach and the overall success of the program (Kimmel and Schoening 2011, 12). It is not clear from this study if this self-evaluation was actually assessing the effectiveness of the program, its ability to adhere to the official Main Street approach, or the overall effectiveness of the Main Street manager. The Trust's claim that the Main Street approach has led to qualitative and quantitative improvements to historic downtowns seems reasonable, however, even without definitive empirical evidence, considering an ample supply of anecdotal evidence from hundreds of programs during its 40-year life-span.

The Main Street Program and Community Design

The Trust created its Main Street approach in the late 1970s and early 1980s in an effort to save struggling historic downtowns from disinvestment and obsolescence.

It is unique in its emphasis on grassroots efforts led by passionate community volunteers that create and run an organization, restructure the local economy, promote the downtown, and design and preserve places. These volunteers are often involved in implementing public art and building and landscape design projects in order to create a better sense of place that “communicate[s] qualities like safety, vitality, and uniqueness” (Lawniczak 2009b, 111).

From three pilot communities in 1976, there are now over two thousand Main Street programs across the United States (Loescher 2009a). The program was inspired, in part, by the “Magdalen Street experiment,” in which the British Civic Trust restored the storefronts of Magdalen Street in Norwich, England, in the late 1950s (Civic Trust 1967). While the revitalization efforts in Norwich were only narrowly focused design principles and as such had limited success (Dalibard 1985, 50; Banks 1988), in the United States, the Trust emphasized issues of organization, promotion, and economics in addition to design in a comprehensive “Main Street approach” to revitalization.

The Trust describes the Main Street approach as a holistic process that engages stakeholders, such as residents, municipalities, and allied community organizations, in an effort to revitalize distressed downtowns. It is overt in its aim to have community stakeholders become directly involved in using heritage as a tool for economic growth (Bull and Girard-Ruel 2009, 3; Loescher 2009b, 11). The Main Street approach is founded on the core ethic of historic preservation/heritage conservation and these four points, which must be addressed concurrently (Dono and Glisson 2009):

Organization: This indicates coordinating the efforts of all stakeholders toward a common goal and forming and sustaining the organizational structure and funding to support the program.

Promotion: Marketing and tourism efforts are initiated and carried out with the goal of selling a positive image of the downtown. Special or regular events are particularly encouraged, along with traditional marketing efforts.

Design: This is the multifaceted approach aimed at improving the appearance of the downtown, starting with saving historic buildings from demolition, removing later layers of change, and then rehabilitating them. Design also focuses on the appearance of window displays, store interiors, and landscape features such as sidewalks, lighting, and streets.

Economic Restructuring: In this area, market surveys are conducted to produce an inventory of the economic and physical assets of the downtown, which are then used to encourage the growth of economic activity in order to attract a wider customer base.

There are also eight guiding principles—be comprehensive, take incremental steps, self-help, build partnerships, identify and capitalize on existing assets, focus on quality over quantity, slow change, and gradual implementation—that direct Main Street programs in their implementation of the four points (Loescher 2009b, 11). Each year, the Trust and many statewide coordinating agencies certify programs that adhere to the Main Street approach. Most Main Street programs are non-profit

organizations and, as such, can solicit funding from members as well as through grants. Paid staff are usually limited to one full-time “Main Street manager,” with the majority of activities being carried out by volunteers from the community. A few Main Street organizations are affiliated with a municipality or a chamber of commerce.

Volunteers who comprise the Main Street program’s board of directors and committees typically receive training from the Trust’s National Main Street Center or from a statewide or regional coordinating program, such as the Downtown Pennsylvania Center, Main Street New Mexico, or the Boston Main Streets Foundation.⁴ The Trust publishes and distributes training handbooks for each of the four points, providing direction on the purpose of the committee and its activities, the responsibilities of individual committee members, the role of the committee’s chairperson, staff responsibilities, and developing work plans. Some coordinating entities have expanded on the Trust’s official material and offer additional training, such as Pennsylvania Downtown Center’s quarterly Main Street Institute.

Community Design Activities in Main Street Programs

A typical Main Street program will create a separate standing committee of volunteers for each of the four points. As one might expect, the design committee is most involved in design and creative aspects that affect the program’s downtown service area. Areas that design committees address include visual merchandizing, facade grants for buildings, public improvements, the creation of design guidelines, providing local design assistance, creating master plans, and public art. These are areas that the Trust recommends each Main Street program address. Not all programs focus on every item, however, with older programs having a broader array of projects than more recent ones.

Visual Merchandizing

Visual merchandizing focuses on the design of the interiors of stores and what is visible outside the building through windows. Window displays should be updated frequently and represent the “business owner’s creativity and understanding of customers” (Steele 2009, 105). The Trust emphasizes issues of lighting, cleanliness, and overall design and organization in these displays in order to increase the visual appeal of shops and thus maximize marketing efforts and increase business. Design committee members learn about consumer shopping psychology and where certain types of goods should be maximally positioned inside stores, the proper colors to use, and how the quality of authentically historic interiors can be “leveraged” to “contribute to the sense of place and the collective experience that certain customers, tourists, and residents seek” (Steele 2009, 109).

Many Main Street programs offer, through their design committee volunteers, assistance to store owners to improve visual merchandizing design, such as the Downtown Sheridan (WY) Association (Sheridan 2014), Victoria (TX) Main

Street Program (Victoria 2014), and the Monett (MO) Main Street Program (Bishoff 2010). Other design committees are more active in their approach, such as with the New London (CT) Main Street Program, which held a series of visual merchandizing workshops that focused on “on store merchandising, design and layout, effective use of window displays, and creation of floor plans that generate the highest sales and attract the most customers” (Woods 2002, 5). Similarly, the Downtown Roseburg (OR) Association sponsored a workshop on storefront design and visual merchandizing from a “nationally recognized retail design consultant” that was vetted by their design committee (Downtown Roseburg 2013).

Facade Grant Programs

While most of the design activities of Main Street programs focus on advocacy, facade grant programs are perhaps one of the most powerful ways that a community can become directly involved in the design of storefronts through volunteers’ efforts in a design committee. Typically, state coordinating entities provide funds to Main Street programs or sometimes foundations, corporate entities, or private donors help to fund these programs. In preparation for facade grant applications, a design committee drafts design guidelines against which these applications are



FIGURES 11.1–11.5 Examples of a community-driven design project from a Main Street program (Historic Downtown Kennewick Partnership, Kennewick, Washington) catalyzed by a facade grant program



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evaluated. The design committee then reviews applications from business owners wishing to apply for grant funds to repair, restore, or preserve storefronts. If the committee deems that the requested changes are not appropriate, they then work with the applicant to come to a resolution. These negotiations are often facilitated and mediated by a Main Street manager. Example of facade grant programs include Main Street Winter Haven (Florida; Winter Haven 2014), Main Street Hanford (California; Hanford 2014), Cedar Falls Community Main Street (Iowa; Cedar Falls 2014a), and Thibodaux Main Street (Louisiana; Thibodaux 2014).

Public Improvements

As defined by the Main Street program, public improvements “include all streetscape elements, from lampposts and benches to parking and pedestrian amenities” (Lawniczak 2009c, 141). These improvements can also include the redesign, cleaning, or creation of plazas and parks. The way in which a design committee accomplishes these large-scale tasks is by brainstorming ideas and forming a collaborative partnership with their municipality (and sometimes state transportation entities) in order to “be involved from day one in the planning process and remain involved through completion” (Lawniczak 2009c, 142). In some cases, the Main Street program itself may be the recipient of large amounts of streetscape funding, but more frequently, the program writes grants on behalf of a municipality, which, upon funding, become the responsibility of a particular city or town to implement. In other cases, the funding is distributed to the municipality, but the Main Street program manages the overall process. This latter case is particularly prevalent where a Main Street program selects design professionals to prepare plans, drawings, and renderings. The municipality then pays the professionals for their services via the grant funds.

Streetscape improvements typically include installing new lampposts, planters, promotional banners, benches, trash containers, trees, paving materials (e.g., brick, stone), wayfinding signage, information kiosks, and removing elements that “clutter” the environment (Lawniczak 2009c, 141–147). The focus is on creating an environment that is more conducive to the experience of pedestrians and to encourage people to stay downtown, recreate, and shop.

Design Guidelines

Design guidelines describe appropriate and inappropriate treatments for a wide variety of visual characteristics in a downtown area, including the form, massing, and scale of buildings; ornamentation, materials, and color; characteristics of signs; and sometimes landscape elements, such as fences. Many Main Street programs create guidelines out of necessity when implementing a facade grant program or as a prelude to establishing a regulatory design review process, such as an historic district commission. Where they do exist without regulatory requirements, they are tied to funding access or are simply advisory in nature. As the Trust describes, design guidelines “help property owners do the right thing, as well as benefit contractors, carpenters, sign manufacturers, and other tradespeople” (Lawniczak 2009a, 128).

Within Main Street programs, design guidelines are used to help preserve the historical authenticity of the area that is under the purview of a program. For this reason, they often base their general recommendations on the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation, a document originally created by the National Park Service in 1977 for federal historic preservation tax credits (Weeks and Grimmer 1995) but now widely adopted at the local, state, and federal level for all historic preservation work in the United States.

One typical example, Paso Robles (California) Downtown Main Street Association's guidelines, developed by its design committee, seeks "to revitalize and enhance the appearance, atmosphere, and convenience of downtown Paso Robles [by] provid[ing] preferred design directions for new construction and restoration or remodel projects so that they respect and complement the scale, proportion and tradition of the historic downtown area" (Paso Robles 2014). Along with prescriptive verbiage, drawings make clear what is appropriate and not appropriate in terms of design. Cedar Falls Community Main Street Program's design guidelines similarly foster "desirable aesthetic qualities," maintain a "rich heritage," "provide consistency and avoid arbitrary design" and also rely on prescriptive language and images to convey appropriateness (Cedar Falls 2014b).

Local Design Assistance

While not common, a number of Main Street programs have formed "facade squads," which are volunteer-led efforts to offer design assistance to property owners that are usually associated with design or sometimes promotion committees. As the name would suggest, the primary focus is on improving the fronts of commercial buildings. Committee volunteers work with professionals, such as architects, to create facade renderings and to coordinate contracting services, sometimes in partnership with statewide coordinating programs, such as New Mexico Main Street (New Mexico 2014). Efforts can also be much more basic, such as volunteers helping with demolition work or repainting, as with the Pryor (OK) Main Street program or the Victor (CO) Main Street program, where in the summers of 2012 and 2013, volunteers repainted the facades of fourteen buildings (Hollowell 2014; Pryor 2014).

Master Plans

A master plan is usually associated with municipal planning efforts to create a comprehensive vision for a geographically bounded area that addresses land use and zoning, streetscapes, transportation, parking, historic preservation, and parks and open space. For dense, commercial downtowns with older buildings, there is an emphasis on encouraging pedestrian activity, supporting mixed-use development, converting one-way streets back to two-way, and rehabilitating existing buildings, where feasible. Larger cities with full-time planners frequently create master plans, but smaller municipalities, who often have no planners on staff, often lack this essential guiding document, and downtown development efforts can be chaotic and lack vision.

Main Street programs have successfully stepped into this vacuum and created a master plan in partnership with their municipality. A typical example of this process is Main Street Franklin (North Carolina), which began efforts toward a master plan with a community visioning process, followed by securing a grant to hire a firm to prepare a plan and then hiring a planning firm to complete the plan (Schlott 2011). Municipalities typically welcome the efforts of Main Street programs in developing

master plans because it “can help lessen the municipality’s workload and financial burden by sharing leadership” (Kalogeris 2009, 156). Volunteers, representing the community’s interests, therefore become directly involved in setting the overall design vision for their own community.

Public Art

Public art projects in Main Street programs range from the visually spectacular, such as murals and sculptures, to less expensive but creative endeavors, such as Orlando (Florida) Main Street’s work with local artists to transform twenty engineering utility cabinets into visual art (Orlando 2013). Alberta (Oregon) Main Street program’s goal was more ambitious when its design committee invited twenty-five artists to submit proposals for seven permanent public art installations that attached to bus railings. According to the Larry Holmes, the volunteer design committee chair, artists were asked to “propose installations that created a street identity inspired by the texture, character and diversity of the community, provided continuity from end to end, but with diversity of form and concept and satisfied appetites for exciting and provocative sensory experiences” (Alberta 2014). Other Main Street programs have catalyzed the creation of murals, as Historic Downtown Lamar’s (Colorado) design committee did when it partnered with the Southeast Colorado Arts Council to create a mural in a downtown park (Lamar 2014).

The Disneyfication of Main Street and Cultural Conflicts

Based on the broad array of potential design activities available to Main Street programs, community volunteers who work in these programs clearly have a significant role in the overall appearance of their downtown. Through volunteer activities, the community’s will becomes imprinted in the physical landscape of the downtown. While professionals are often involved in streetscape and facade restorations, it is these volunteers who often make the final decisions as to what is and is not built, especially in the case of facade grants where volunteers have *bona fide* power to control the design of their downtown. In other cases, such as master plans, volunteers’ influence is more limited, but still significant.

Critics charge that the resulting design changes these volunteers make to their downtowns look too much like Disneyland’s “Main Street USA,” which is a scaled-down replica of downtown Fort Collins, Colorado (Francaviglia 1996, 148). Richard Francaviglia (1996, 178, 179) describes:

The cumulative or overall effect of the Main Street Program has been to either stop change along Main Street or to reverse it, so that the streetscapes are often backdated in appearance. Sometimes through the placing of awnings or the careful selection of signage and paint, these buildings begin to take on a visual uniformity that unites them as a retail marketing package—much in the way Walt Disney marketed in his Main Street.

Street lamps, brick paving, and benches all tend to look similar across the entire country, regardless if the downtown is in Maine or Arizona, which disturbs many historic preservationists and architects who see this homogeneity as injurious to historical authenticity and regionalism. Philip Jackson and Robert Kuhlken (2006, 46) note that Main Street programs “seek to freeze-frame a period of time in hopes of capitalizing on nostalgia.” But, as Stephen Williams and Alan Lew (2014, 128) argue, the Main Street program flexibly defines authenticity to recognize that “the post-modern tourist . . . is more interested in the experience, no matter its source, than any objective measure of authenticity.”

This rhetoric fails to validate the community’s own values used to define what it thinks is important in terms of design. Because Main Street volunteers share similar values in terms of appropriate and inappropriate design interventions that conserve the historical authenticity of their downtown, they form a kind of “revitalization culture” due to their shared beliefs (Wells 2010). This revitalization culture is defined, in part, by its members’ rejection of orthodox preservation doctrine, including the reliance on fabric-based definitions of authenticity that is part of what Laurajane Smith (2006) refers to as the “Authorized Heritage Discourse” (AHD) that is created and defined by experts. Because the values expressed by the AHD are in themselves another set of cultural values, rather than objective, scientific “truths” (Waterton, Smith, and Campbell 2006), critiques against the design choices made by adherents to the AHD against Main Street volunteers are not necessarily objective, nor of an intrinsically greater value than the volunteers’ own values and beliefs.

Ultimately, the way that volunteers wish to have the historical authenticity of their downtowns expressed usually successfully revives distressed downtowns. Tourists, who have a value system more closely allied to the revitalization culture than the AHD, readily appreciate downtowns under the purview of Main Street programs. Arguably, the penchant that the revitalization culture has for restoration versus preservation (i.e., retention of all layers of changed building fabric from various time periods) results in the loss of informational value. Is it more important to save the downtown by using a more flexible, sociocultural definition of historical authenticity, or should we let it collapse in ruin in order to privilege preservation doctrine and material authenticity? The former solution, which values people and living communities over the physical fabric, is more likely to win advocates than an unsustainable archeological method.

Volunteers, Skepticism, Political Issues, and Advocacy

According to the Trust, “Main Street programs emphasize grassroots support, which is a different philosophical underpinning than most community or economic development strategies” (Adkins and Lynch 2009, 28). As a Main Street manager and later as a faculty member guiding graduate students in planning for Main Street programs, I encountered a common misperception from community members, city staff, and political leaders—that a successful downtown revitalization program requires many paid employees. This staff-heavy model is common with community

development corporations (CDCs) or municipalities, which rely on paid employees to drive and implement revitalization programs. If a Main Street program is properly implemented according to the Trust's guidelines, however, volunteers perform nearly all of the program's activities, which makes this volunteer-reliant approach quite different from the way most downtown revitalization entities operate. In the Main Street approach, the members of a community make the decision to create their own program, design it to their needs, and then provide the labor, vision, and know-how to implement it. As the Trust directs, "the Main Street approach relies on creating community-driven, not staff-driven, programs in order to encourage the support and involvement of local stakeholders" (Adkins and Lynch 2009, 25). The purpose of a Main Street manager, who is often the only paid staff person in the organization, is to manage and coordinate the efforts of these volunteers, but not to do their work for them (Adkins and Lynch 2009, 26). Therefore, the more a community "buys-in" to a Main Street program, the more potential volunteers there are to help implement projects, which is why successful Main Street programs not only have a large volunteer base but broad community support.

Volunteers in the organization, economic restructuring, design, and promotion committees, with guidance from the Main Street manager, create work plans that define goals, objectives, specific tasks, and people who are to complete these tasks. The board of directors, also composed of volunteers, then approves these work plans. While it is the responsibility of these committees and the board of directors to create projects, it is also their responsibility to implement them. Ideally, "tasks must be delegated to volunteers, not staff" (Adkins and Lynch 2009, 27).

In what the Trust refers to as the "catalyst phase" (Adkins and Dono 2009, 21), when the program is just beginning, supporters tend to be outnumbered by skeptics in the community. This reaction is understandable, given that Main Street programs begin in distressed, underutilized downtown areas that have long been full of empty storefronts, are dirty and unmaintained, and feel unsafe. In this climate, a few enterprising individuals convince fellow community members to form a visioning group, create a plan for a Main Street program, and then seek the necessary funds from grants and donations to hire a full-time Main Street manager. These early volunteer efforts, if successful, usually attract an increasing number of supporters of the Main Street program, but many communities have persistent naysayers who are, at a minimum, suspect of downtown revitalization approaches, and may be outright hostile, potentially sabotaging efforts (Goforth 2009; Simmons 2013). Sometimes naysayers are members of city councils, which can hurt efforts to create the necessary public-private partnership for a successful Main Street program. Champions of a nascent Main Street program also need to be politically savvy and not alienate potential supporters who could offer funding. This latter aspect can be particularly challenging because, in this early stage before an organization is formed and a Main Street manager hired, all members of a Main Street are community volunteers who have a great deal of behavioral latitude not typically expressed by a paid employee. For this reason, some early Main Street programs earn an activist reputation that may not sit well with conservative, small-town government, especially when trust,

stability, and reliability are paramount. On the other hand, volunteers who are too complacent and not willing to question the status quo and exceed expectations will see their early organizational efforts flounder.

This middle ground, most aptly described as “advocacy,” requires that volunteers build relationships with elected officials in order to “produce policies that benefit [the] program” and “defend against threats” (Sincavage and VanBellenghem 2009, 60). These efforts include preparing a message on the need for a Main Street program, effectively communicating with elected officials, and developing partnerships with allied organizations in an effort to pool resources. Outreach efforts include the use of websites, social media, e-mail, and plenty of face-to-face meetings. This was a critical component of my work as a Main Street manager, where I had regular meetings with my state and federal representatives and senators, along with local council members, to promote the Main Street approach, my program, and its volunteers and to seek funding opportunities. My volunteer board members met with many of the same people, usually during the day, and sometimes struggled to balance personal and professional commitments with their Main Street work. For this reason, some of my most proactive board members ran their own downtown businesses, which provided the needed flexibility. This relationship with elected officials needs to be carefully cultivated, realizing that the elected officials usually desire a positive public relations opportunity by being associated with a successful Main Street program.

Once a Main Street program is established, a reliable funding stream secured, and a full-time manager hired, the program enters the “growth” phase in which large-scale problems are addressed, such as streetscape design or the development of a master plan. These efforts require a close partnership with a local municipality and the development of a high level of trust between both entities. In my work as a Main Street manager in Quakertown, Pennsylvania, I saw how local government officials and borough council members sometimes resisted the efforts of the Main Street program due to the perception that volunteers were not qualified to make design decisions, that sufficient funding could not be located, and that the interest of the Main Street stakeholders did not match the broader interests of the larger community. The Main Street program in Quakertown persevered and garnered the trust of the borough and downtown stakeholders, although the gains—a couple of community parks—took more than a decade to achieve. The Trust recognizes that these kinds of slow results are fairly typical of most Main Street programs (Adkins and Dono 2009, 21), which mirrors my own experience not only in Quakertown but in other communities as well. For instance, when I volunteered for the Main Street program in Kennewick, Washington, in the first five years of the design committee’s existence, its most significant achievement was establishing a facade grant program.

Baby Steps, Funding, Comprehensiveness, and Community Buy-In

Because of the need for patience, the Trust is careful, when describing the development phases of a Main Street program, to stress that the overall process can be

distressingly slow. A typical Main Street program may take a decade or more to produce large-scale and dramatic differences for a community (Adkins and Dono 2009, 21). This situation can be frustrating for those involved, especially volunteers who view their donation of time, resources, and money as an investment in their community. During the development and growth of the Main Street program, design projects are more likely to fail than succeed, if for no other reason than a lack of patience. The Trust addresses this issue by advocating the concept of taking baby steps in the work of Main Street programs, which emphasizes quality over quantity. As Vince Martinez from the Colorado Community Revitalization Association advises, these programs recognize the value of patience and that there is no instant solution for a “downtown [that] has gone into neglect over decades” (Darnell 2007).

A perennial issue for most non-profits, including Main Street programs, is securing unrestricted funding sources that can be used to pay the salary of a full-time Main Street manager. Without a manager to coordinate the activities of volunteers, the program is much more likely to fail, based on the early experiences of the Trust in launching the Main Street approach through the first pilot programs in 1976 (Dalibard 1985) and substantiated by four decades of evidence. Most foundations will not allow their grants to pay for employee salaries, which means that the only other reliable sources are direct donations from stakeholders, including membership fees, and government funding sources. A Main Street program should be able to secure an annual source of funding from their municipality, even if it is a small amount, as it shows that the town or city has a vested stake in the success of the program. The lack of this funding source is indicative of a poor relationship between the Main Street program and the municipality, and also indicates a lack of volunteer participation in advocacy and outreach efforts. State economic development departments are also a source of funding for salaries. Until the 2007–9 recession, when the grant program was changed, the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development held the distinction for the most generous grants for Main Street programs, completely funding most programs’ needs for the first five years of their existence, including the Main Street manager’s salary.

Even with adequate funding, Main Street programs often fail because they neglect to focus equally on each of the four points (Means 2014, 51). Frequently, there is an overemphasis on promotion, while the other three points are deprecated, especially economic restructuring and, to a lesser degree, design. These “skin deep” programs fail on a number of levels, including the ability to justify their own existence.

But perhaps most importantly, community buy-in is essential for the creation, growth, and maintenance of a Main Street program and appears to be positively correlated with the length of tenure of both volunteers and Main Street managers (Kimmel and Schoening 2011, 4). The relationship between the participation of a community in planning processes and an increase in community-buy is well established (Roberts 2008; Flint 2012; Gallent and Robinson 2012), so it would not be unreasonable to see this same relationship expressed in Main Street programs.

Moreover, this kind of community buy-in translates to empowering a community through ownership of the overall revitalization process. Main Street programs that rely too much on paid staff and/or a small number of volunteers in lieu of a wider community base are much more likely to fail in the long term due to a number of factors, including a lack of constituency support in the eyes of elected leaders.

Conclusion

Main Street programs represent one of the more effective ways that community stakeholders can empower themselves to design significant aspects of their own historic, commercial downtown. A successful program, which is a powerful vehicle to engage a community through volunteer efforts, can be responsible for the design of a wide variety of public amenities, including streetscapes, parks, and public art. Volunteers in Main Street programs can even influence how private owners treat buildings through financial incentives, such as facade grants, and promoting effective visual merchandizing. While sometimes controversial, the design decisions that volunteers make are more reflective of community values than those made by design and preservation professionals.

Volunteers in Main Street programs are afforded this unique opportunity to directly influence the design of their downtown because of the emphasis on the community helping itself. This grassroots approach means that volunteers have to engage in political processes and learn the balance between activism and complacency so that they are seen positively as advocates for their downtowns. Volunteers in these kinds of programs also face the challenge of being seen as unqualified to do their work, yet experience proves that in many cases, volunteers produce superior results compared to hired staff and consultants. The reason for this situation is likely due to the fact that these volunteers feel far more invested in the outcome of their efforts than any outside consultant could ever be. While often thought of as a detriment, Main Street programs' slow process toward revitalization allows volunteers the chance to patiently engage skeptics and change opinions, resulting in a gradual but continual process of community buy-in that is essential to any revitalization program.

My work as a volunteer in Main Street and Elm Street programs helped me better understand my own volunteers' perspectives and challenges when I later became a Main Street manager. At the end of what were very long days, it was easier for me to commiserate with my volunteers' challenges than to complain about the fact that I had to be at meetings several times a week until late at night. In some ways, the work of volunteers is much more difficult than paid staff because you never can truly leave your work behind when you go home. As a Main Street program matures, the community increasingly looks toward their nascent Main Street volunteers as leaders, and with this evolution comes trust, which is essential as the community waits many years for changes to occur.

There are few other programs with the longevity and record of success of the Main Street approach that empower community volunteers to the same extent.

While concrete, empirical data may be lacking to understand causal relationships for success, the fact remains that Main Street programs, when properly implemented according to the Trust's guidelines, are a powerful tool for catalyzing community design.

Notes

- 1 The National Trust for Historic Preservation is a non-profit organization that United States Congress chartered in 1949 to serve as a nationwide advocate for historic preservation activities. See SavingPlaces.org.
- 2 Pennsylvania's Elm Street program takes the precepts of the Main Street approach and applies it to a residential area. See <http://www.padowntown.org/programs-services/elm-street>.
- 3 See <http://www.preservationnation.org/main-street/about-main-street/reinvestment-statistics-1.html>.
- 4 As of 2014, the Trust indicates that there are forty-five statewide and regional coordinating programs that receive direct support from the National Main Street Center. See <http://www.preservationnation.org/main-street/about-main-street/the-programs/coordinating-program-types.html>.

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