Make-Believe Main Streets: Hyperreality and the Lifestyle Center

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This article examines a new type of shopping venue known as the lifestyle center — an open-air retail mall that borrows and distorts elements of the traditional American Main Street. The article recaps the popular notion of Main Street as a place and an image, examines the character of the lifestyle center and its present commercial success, and provides a detailed look at its residential component. It then analyzes three recently completed projects. Unlike traditional Main Streets, these new shopping complexes are built far from the center of any existing town, and rather than integrating with older areas of urban fabric, they tend to rely on conditions of social and spatial isolation.

> *Main Street, U.S.A., is America at the turn of the century — the crossroads of an era. The gas lamps and the electric lamps, the horse drawn car and the auto car. Main Street is everyone's home town . . . the heartland of America.*
>
> — Walt Disney[1]

On August 24, 2006, another chapter began in America's long experimentation with shopping center design. Ten thousand residents of the Dayton, Ohio, area had their first chance to "go for The Greene," a new retail center modeled on a traditional American Main Street.[2] As the crowds streamed in, they had little way of knowing that just two days before, the place had looked more like a war zone than a shopping center. Broken glass had littered the sidewalks; dumpsters had overflowed with construction debris; and bits of paper and cardboard had danced in the breeze. The transformation completed by opening day was amazing: visitors gawked at an immaculately cleaned and manicured landscape containing a small village green, half a million square feet of high-end shops, a fourteen-screen movie theater, and fifteen restaurants.[3]

By all accounts it was an impressive event. While a number of shops and the upscale apartments were not yet completed, most stores and restaurants were open as scheduled. Guests easily endured two-hour waits at the restaurants; but with their vibrating pagers, they

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FIGURE 1. *Sanctifying the shopping mall. (Left to right) Father James Bartlett, Pastor Doug Roe, Yaromir Steiner, Brother Tarif Hourani, and Rabbi Emeritus Samuel Fox at the "blessing" held during The Greene's groundbreaking ceremony on April 6, 2004. Source: www.steiner.com.*

could continue shopping until their tables were ready. The most popular public attraction was the dry-deck fountain in the middle of the green, where kids of all ages ran in an out of random bursts of water, screaming and laughing. Meanwhile, television cameras recorded the festivities, and newspaper reporters roamed the crowd looking for colorful quotes.

Over the course of the next year, the developer, Yaromir Steiner, anticipated the project would receive 18 million visitors.[4] Given the area's population of less than 700,000, this meant that every local resident might be expected to visit The Greene twenty-five times in the coming year.[5] As "The Saints Go Marching In" was played by the Dayton Jazz Orchestra, the crowd marched into the shops and restaurants with their credit cards and checkbooks at the ready. Such religious references were hardly out of character with the center's marketing strategy. After all, at the center's ground-breaking two years earlier, Steiner had surrounded himself with an ecumenical group of distinguished local clergy **(FIG.1)**.

The Greene is just one of many lifestyle centers across the country that now incorporate places to shop, live, work and play in faux Main Street settings. This article traces the origins of this phenomenon in nostalgia for the traditional American shopping street, beginning with Disneyland's Main Street, U.S.A. It then focuses on three cases: Bay Street in Emeryville, California; Santana Row in San Jose, California; and The Greene in Dayton, Ohio. These projects demonstrate the power of private capital in an era of municipal decline. All three were built using "innovative" public-private partnerships that forced the public to underwrite private gain. They also typify a new retailing model that leverages tradition by seeking to re-create a streetscape abandoned a generation ago by public agencies, and destroyed by the very companies now seeking to profit from its revival.

The article suggests that these new Main Streets are simulacra — make-believe, hyperreal manifestations of a world that has largely disappeared. Patrons of lifestyle centers inhabit a spatial dimension that has little to do with an accurate reproduction of older Main Streets. Rather, their reality is that of the shopping mall, with a focus on consumption over community.

THE TRADITIONAL MAIN STREET

Across America, towns, both large and small, historically anchored their commercial centers on what in many cases was simply called "Main Street" **(FIG.2)**. As the name implies, this was a place central to the function and image of the town. It accommodated both vehicles and pedestrians; hosted parades, fairs, and other civic events; and was lined by commercial,

FIGURE 2. *A traditional Main Street in McPherson, Kansas (founded in 1872). McPherson's Main Street is one of 22 in Kansas and 1,200 nationwide participating in the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street program.*

civic, and residential structures. Because such Main Streets are the prototype for today's lifestyle centers, it is important to understand their design and use — both real and imagined.

In most American towns, including Walt Disney's hometown of Marceline, Missouri, Main Street, as it emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was typically part of a simple street pattern. As historian Richard Francaviglia has pointed out, its "rectilinear layout may be unimaginative, but its straight lines and its predictability reflected the street's straightforward function — commerce."[6] Simplicity was no doubt valued because it sped the process of design and construction, which resulted in quicker building occupancies. In addition, the central location of the street and the parallel configuration of its buildings helped spatially define a commercial zone for newly established towns. With usually just enough space for an ample sidewalk out front, the buildings formed a continuous "wall" that provided a sense of enclosure and urbanity.

Within the public realm, other design features contributed to the prototypical Main Street. These included on-street parking, regularly spaced street trees, and distinctive street furniture; more parking might be found behind the buildings in surface lots. Many Main Streets also provided civic open space, providing a setting for parades and other civic events. And in many towns, Main Street terminated in or incorporated a civic square or green — as part of an urban design strategy in which city halls, courthouses and churches anchored key intersections, terminated important vistas, or surrounded the town square.

Main Street typically supported three primary uses: commercial, civic and residential.[7] Structures were commonly two and three stories tall, with shops on the ground floor and residential and office uses above. According to historian Richard Longstreth, the inclusion of housing above retail was a key attribute of Main Street.[8] The design vocabulary of these mixed-use buildings also created a unified image. Connected buildings formed a continuous row along the street; large ground floor storefronts advertised products for sale; smaller windows punctuated the floors above; and low-sloped or flat roofs were hidden behind sometimes elaborate parapets.

Main Streets began to decline following World War II, as their retail and commercial tenants relocated to suburban shopping centers and office parks. These new developments were financed by government-backed loans for returning veterans, accessed by a growing network of federally funded highways, and supported by local real estate interests eager to benefit from a new land boom.[9]

The final blow to Main Street came with the rise of the enclosed shopping mall, the brainchild of architect Victor Gruen. Gruen had hoped the mall would help strengthen communities and benefit businesses and consumers by concentrating complementary shops. Instead, malls led to the demise of Main Streets as the social and economic hubs of towns across the United States.[10]

RISE OF THE LIFESTYLE CENTER

Despite its loss of centrality in many towns, the emotional and aesthetic appeal of Main Street — as a place where a community could gather, shop, and do business — lives on as a symbol, immortalized in films and romanticized in songs.[11] Typical of this nostalgia is Main Street, U.S.A., the scaled reproduction at the entrance to Disneyland, modeled on the Main Streets Walt Disney remembered from his Midwestern boyhood.

The image of Main Street has now also become the model for the latest fad in retailing — the lifestyle center. The irony here, according to community advocate Stacey Mitchell, is that "developers and retail chains have taken the very thing they destroyed, Main Street, and are selling it back to people in the form of the lifestyle center."[12]

In the ever-evolving world of retail, development is driven by a continuing, elusive struggle for market share. Just when a position seems secure, it will slip away as a new model appears. In the latest move in this game of one-upmanship, high-end shops are relocating from the shopping malls of the 1980s and 1990s to lifestyle centers — places devoid of traditional anchor stores and enclosed pedestrian spaces. These new venues are designed to mimic the traditional and much-loved Main Streets. It is this nostalgic image that the marketeers for Ann Taylor, Banana Republic, and the Gap are counting on to lure a new generation of customers.

The enclosed mall is dead — replaced by the street. But this is no longer a public street; it is a private world patrolled by rent-a-cops and subject to closing times. In this respect, the lifestyle center is more similar to Disney's diminutive Main Street than the real thing. However, unlike the scaled-down version in Disneyland, developers have scaled-up these spaces to meet a demand for economies of scale. Large retail floorplates, parking areas sized for complete auto-dependency, and monotonous rows of stacked flats are the new reality. Nor are these streets "Main" anymore. They are disconnected from the surrounding urban fabric and turn a blank wall to the public realm.

This new model for retail design is becoming widespread. The International Council of Shopping Centers (ICSC) defines a lifestyle center as any open-air shopping mall with at least 50,000 square feet of upscale, specialty retail space.[13] ICSC numbers show these centers are fast replacing enclosed shopping malls. In 2006, developers built one enclosed mall. By contrast, they built more than sixty lifestyle centers in 2005 and 2006.[14]

According to Michael Southworth, the reason for the surge in demand for such places is that "people are experiencing mall saturation or 'mall fatigue' and have become bored with the inwardly focused, disconnected and placeless suburban shopping center."[15] He has also suggested that "developers have come to realize there is something about Main Street that people want, and if malls are going to survive, they are going to have to have some of the features of Main Street."[16] These features, however, will not be the small-scale, local businesses once at the heart of most Main Streets. Nor will they include the public places that once occupied prominent positions on many Main Streets; libraries, city halls, and churches are not part of the pro-forma. Rather, developers are trying to capitalize on image — to use imageability to capture market share.

Today's lifestyle centers are simulacra — in the sense developed by social theorist Jean Baudrillard.[17] They are not simple copies of bygone Main Streets; nor are they fantasies without a prototype. Rather, they are hyperreal manifestations that consume the prototype they are meant to emulate. The reproduction has become the new reality.

Richard Francaviglia has argued that the traditional Main Street presumed high levels of income and "a spatially focused population indoctrinated in the virtues of consumption."[18] But products and services are not the only things being consumed along the new Main Streets — so is the image of Main Street as a place of refuge and delight. In today's "overcrowded marketplace," Margaret Crawford has argued, "imagery has become increasingly critical as a way of attracting particular shops and facilitating acts of consumption."[19] The image of Main Street sells, and developers are using it to tap the $2 trillion that Americans spend each year at shopping malls.[20]

Lifestyle centers also employ the superficial symbols of Main Street to conceal a new set of social relations based on consumption. In arguing for his concept of simulacra, Baudrillard wrote that contemporary society has replaced reality with signs: lived experience is reality simulated rather than actual reality.[21] The forms of communication a society employs, he also wrote, determine its social relations. In this sense, the lifestyle center is a form of communication that privileges consumption in hyperreal settings.

The notion of "lifestyle" is key to this reality. The lifestyle center is popular because it simulates a more complete urban experience. But the life these centers are responding to is one of pressure, multitasking, lack of time, and a consequent desire for convenience. According to Yaromir Steiner, developer of The Greene, this creates a demand for an integrated experience that collocates shopping, dining, entertainment, and even housing.[22]

In competition with older enclosed malls, lifestyle centers also present more basic economic advantages. For instance, common area maintenance (CAM) charges at Bayer Property's lifestyle centers average less than half the norm for enclosed malls ($6 per square foot vs. $15 per square foot).[23] There are many reasons for the savings: exterior asphalt paving is less expensive to maintain than interior tiled floors; HVAC systems are only needed for leasable space; and high maintenance roofs are not needed for common spaces.

Construction costs are also lower. After all, paving a street with asphalt is less expensive than tiling a pedestrian mall. And developers can place lifestyle centers in smaller areas than regional malls, making them suitable to urban brownfields as well as suburban greenfields.[24] Moreover, sales per square foot are typically higher at lifestyle centers ($298 vs. $242).[25] At the most popular centers, like Easton Town Center outside of Columbus, Ohio, this rate can easily top $550 per square foot.[26] Apparently, the "experience" of the lifestyle center is attractive to affluent buyers who can afford $100 ties and $300 handbags at specialty outlets like Gucci and Banana Republic.

Developers David Scholl and Robert Williams have argued that lifestyle centers modeled after "Main Street, U.S.A." can evoke a sense of place by offering a complete experience that includes places to shop, dine and play.[27] Pedestrian-scaled streets, fountains, village-like parks, and quaint sidewalk cafes contribute substantially to this experience. These settings can be built rather economically out of asphalt, concrete, stucco-clad frame buildings, simulated historical details, and canvas awnings. Missing, however, are the attributes that once made Main Street a center of community — public buildings, plazas, parks and churches. Traditional Main Streets were never simply places to shop.

The most striking difference between many lifestyle centers and older shopping malls is the housing the former may include. While pod-like apartment complexes have long grown up around shopping malls, they reflect the view that housing and commerce should be completely separate. They are also frequently divided from one another by multilane arterial roads with few places for pedestrians to cross. Even if pedestrians can cross these wide streets, they have to navigate a maze of parked cars to reach the front doors.

The addition of housing to the "product mix" of a lifestyle center is a quality-of-life issue, Yaromir Steiner has argued. "People want places to sit out and eat lunch, and offices in walking distance and residences nearby. The mixed-use approach leans toward this lifestyle."[28] With low vacancies and high rents, housing in lifestyle centers is proving extremely profitable. According to Steiner: "Single-use retail environments, whether malls, power centers, lifestyle centers or neighborhood centers will soon be the exception rather than the rule."[29]

The effort has also been praised as an innovative effort to achieve suburban densification. Advocates of The New Urbanism have long argued for denser suburbs and town centers as a way to mitigate the effects of sprawl.[30] Now developers of lifestyle centers are responding, building flats, lofts, townhouses and condominiums above their stores.

In many urban settings, residential densities at a lifestyle center may reach a respectable twenty to thirty dwelling units per acre. However, in suburban settings, their densities of two to three units per acre are not much different from a typical subdivision.[31] Nevertheless, the units provide a new option in environments that have historically offered little choice. Until lifestyle centers emerged, most suburban residents could choose either a single-family subdi-

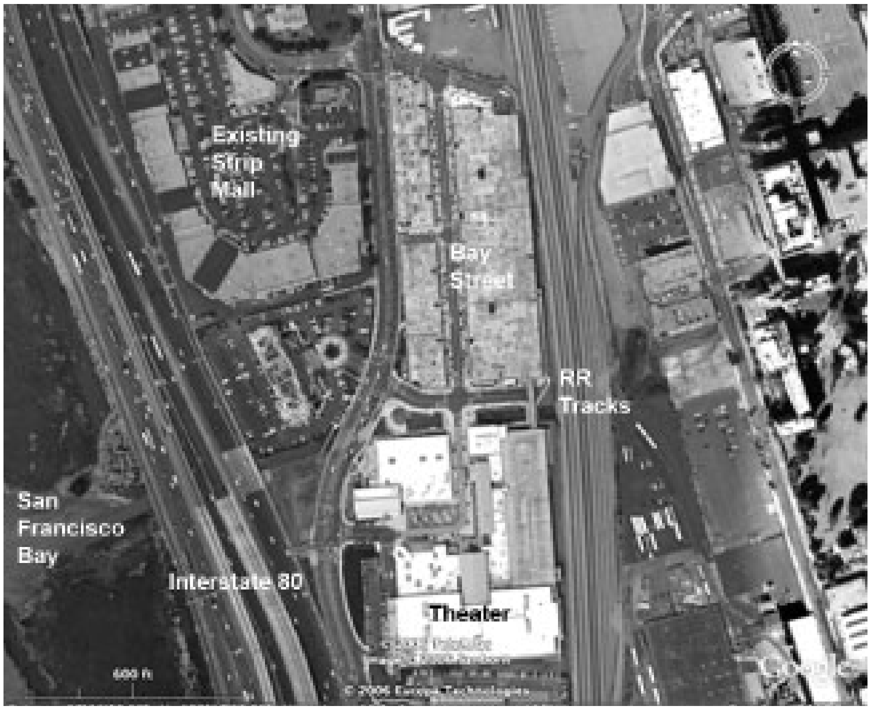


FIGURE 3. *Bay Street runs north-south and terminates in the sixteen-screen AMC theater. The narrow site is bounded by Interstate 80 to the west and several active railroad tracks to the east. The north half of the development has two mixed-use buildings on both sides of Bay Street. The south half has the theater, bookstore, and second-level food court. Source: Google Earth.*

FIGURE 4. *The site of Santana Row is roughly bounded by Stevens Creek Boulevard on the north, Winchester Boulevard on the west, Olsen Drive on the south, and Hatton Street on the east. Santana Row runs north-south down the center of the site. Parking garages face most of Winchester Boulevard and parking lots face Hatton Street. The movie theater (B) is south of Olsen Drive and Park Valencia (A) is west of the hotel. Source: Google Earth.*

vision or a multifamily apartment complex. Now residential units in the mixed-use buildings of lifestyle centers are in high demand and command substantial premiums over typical multifamily settings (FIGS.3,4).

The isolated locations of lifestyle centers clearly still distinguish them from traditional Main Streets. But their open-air environment is a far more appealing destination than the hermetically sealed world of the shopping mall. Patrons can park in convenient rear garages instead of massive open lots. And, perhaps most significantly, the featured spaces in a lifestyle center are for gathering rather than shopping. Lifestyle centers rarely depend on typical anchor department stores. Macy's, Dillard's, and J.C. Penney are no longer the draw. Rather, according to Mike Duffey of Steiner and

Associates, "The anchors (in lifestyle centers) are the more traditional things that you used to see in towns — a large bookstore, a cluster of restaurants, a movie theater, a town square."[32]

Nathan Fishkin of Federal Realty Investment Trust, developer of Santana Row, has argued that "The place itself is the anchor."[33] Yaromir Steiner has gone further. He has suggested that his town centers are anchored by "authentic public spaces, consisting of streets and sidewalks, plazas and squares, fountains and parks — all the places available for both public enjoyment and civic functions."[34]

Successful developers seem to have learned the lesson of Manhattan's Central Park and Philadelphia's Rittenhouse Square: urban open space can add value to adjacent private development.[35]

BAY STREET: THE "ANTI-MALL"?

Built on what was once heavily polluted industrial land, Bay Street in Emeryville, California, is a 1,200-foot-long, three-block version of Main Street that includes two to four levels of housing on top of ground-floor retail (FIGS.5,6). Its developer calls its constituent form the "neotraditional Main Street block."[36]

FIGURE 5. *Mixing uses along Bay Street. A parking garage is sandwiched between two-level townhouses (plan top) and ground floor retail (plan bottom). The continuous building has elevations that imply differently. Source: Bay Street One, Emeryville, California.*

FIGURE 6. *Townhouse plan, Bay Street. This one-bedroom, 1.5-bathroom unit has a den and balcony. Units facing west have a view of the Golden Gate Bridge. The entry opens to a pedestrian walk on the garage podium. Source: Bay Street One, Emeryville, California.*

FIGURE 7. *Bay Street's private side. Although a bit more cramped than a traditional Main Street, Bay Street has many of its elements, including mixed-use buildings with ground-floor retail below housing and on-street parking. Bay Street, however, is a private street and shuts down when the stores close.*

FIGURE 8. *Bay Street's public side. The project's west elevation turns a blank wall to the existing public realm. Without sidewalks or storefront windows, pedestrians are clearly discouraged from spending time on public land. The garage fenestration is visible below the townhouse balconies.*

Bay Street's 400,000 square feet of retail space and 379 housing units occupy a narrow strip of land between Interstate 80 and a heavily used railroad corridor. Along its interior street, on-street parking, storefront windows, and detailed facades provide a carefully controlled image (FIG.7). But it turns a blank face to the outside (FIG.8). One reason is that nearly two thousand parking spaces are placed either behind the retail buildings or sandwiched between the retail and residential floors.

Like other lifestyle centers, Bay Street offers an array of brand-name outlets (Ann Taylor Loft, Banana Republic, Gap, J. Jill, Pottery Barn, Victoria's Secret, etc.), a movie theater (sixteen screens), a bookstore (two-level Barnes and Noble), and eleven restaurants (including the staple of many lifestyle centers, P.F. Chang's China Bistro). But in an odd departure from other lifestyle centers, many of the restaurants cluster around a second-level outdoor food court that feels more like a shopping mall than a Main Street.

The Jerde Partnership, which designed this multilevel imitation Main Street, is no stranger to this type of project. Jon Jerde and his firm have designed dozens of large retail complexes, including San Diego's Horton Plaza and Minnesota's Mall of America. According to the firm's promotional materials:

> *Jerde Placemaking reinvents the authentic urban experience that has often been lost by modern planning. The world's great cities evolved naturally over centuries, their town squares, streets, and public marketplaces serving as commercial and social centers. The organizations and forms of early cities organically grew out of the natural pedestrian paths people used to move into, about and through them, and these patterns informed the cities' distinct characters, particular forms and mix of uses.*[37]

An authentic urban experience is clearly more than a trip to an open-air shopping mall. On the other hand, when the intended sense of authenticity is itself deliberately fake, the designers just have to work harder. In this regard, the main problem in Emeryville was that a pedestrian experience had to be "reinvented" where it had never before existed.

Emeryville never had a traditional, walkable commercial center; it was an industrial town. Easy access to all modes of transportation helped make it one of the longest-operating industrial areas in the San Francisco Bay Area. However, as older industries became obsolete, this gritty city's central location — across the Bay Bridge from San Francisco, north of Oakland, and south of Berkeley — made it ideal for redevelopment. In the 1990s, power centers, strip malls, and enormous destination retail outlets became Emeryville's chosen new industry. In 2002, condominiums and lofts also began replacing paint factories and other fading industrial uses. Bay Street merely followed these trends.

The sequence of events leading to Bay Street's construction offers important lessons. The City of Emeryville initially spent more than $36 million to acquire the five parcels that make up the project area (in some cases using its power of eminent domain). It then arranged for the area to be cleaned of toxic chemicals before any developers even showed interest in it.[38]

According to Ignacio Dayrit, a redevelopment specialist for the city, the soil on site was contaminated with arsenic, pesticides, and petroleum products.[39] It had at various times been used by the makers of paints, insecticides, and sulfur. Yet, according to Emeryville's economic development director, Pat O'Keefe, the city "could not advance the retail concept any further without getting control of the site and clearing it."[40]

The Bay Street case indicates how a legacy of poorly regulated private industry eventually became a public burden. While the paint companies and pesticide makers used and polluted the land for decades, they were never held accountable. Instead, taxpayers assumed responsibility for cleaning up the mess — in order to transfer the site to another private enterprise.[41] In effect, this externalized long-term costs to the public and internalized profits to the private sector.

After the clean-up, Madison Marquette acquired the property with plans to develop it as a lifestyle center. According to P. Eric Hohmann, Madison Marquette's vice president for acquisitions and development: "This is the antimall. We would like to think that Bay Street is currently the next thing in the evolution of the shopping center."[42] Judging by the numbers, Hohmann is correct. He is also correct in labeling Bay Street a shopping center, because that is what it is, despite its heavy-handed effort to include housing above the stores.

Nevertheless, according to Hohmann: "Our goal is to make it look like a public street. If you think it's a private street, we've failed in our design intent."[43] But if one scans the informational kiosks, the list of rules and regulations makes it clear this is not true public space. There are curfews, dress codes, and behavior standards — the new face of "public" space.

For its part, the City of Emeryville was not interested in building a network of attractive streets and open spaces. Instead, its planners and politicians turned the task over to the private sector. In return, the city was relieved of having to fund, build, maintain and secure a real public realm.

SANTANA ROW: IN SEARCH OF A "WORLD-CLASS MAIN STREET"

Imagine walking along a classic Main Street, under an arcade, past engaging displays in tastefully designed storefronts, around a green filled with parents and children out for a sunny afternoon, to a small square with oak trees shading sidewalk cafes and small fountains. Today, however, you do not have to travel to a medieval Italian town such as Pordenone or Bologna to have this experience; you can have it at Santana Row, a lifestyle center about three miles west of downtown San Jose, California (**FIGS.9,10**). This ambitious, 1,500-foot-long, three-block development lies perpendicular to Stevens Creek Boulevard — an eight-lane arterial that parallels Interstate 280. It features seventy shops, twenty restaurants, five spas, a 213-room boutique hotel, and 1,200 apartments and condominiums above the shops.

Like other lifestyle centers, Santana Row includes all the usual lifestyle retail outlets. But it also includes some decidedly lower-end big-box stores — Best Buy and Crate and Barrel. These hug the little-used sidewalk along auto-dominated Stevens Creek Boulevard. Otherwise, blank walls, parking lots, and garages conceal Santana Row's pedestrian-oriented interior from the outside.

In other ways, however — in terms of its length, building typologies, and open spaces — Santana Row mimics a Main Street of a century ago (updated to include a more upscale, European sensibility). This is no surprise, since it was designed by Street-Works, an urban design and development firm based in Virginia. Its projects frequently emphasize a Main Street theme.[44] And at Santana Row, the designers used their experience to convert a failing open-air shopping center, Town and Country Village, built in the 1960s, into an urban village.

Santana Row was one of the first West Coast lifestyle centers to combine living and shopping. According to Federal Realty Investment Trust, the developer, the site offered the opportunity to build "an architecturally stunning new neighborhood combining residential and retail space where people could live, work, shop, dine, and enjoy time together."[45] The approach included using "the best of European and American town design to create a beautiful, world-class shopping/living district in the heart of Silicon Valley, combining old-world features and high-tech comfort into a charming ambiance."[46] This even involved reconstructing a nineteenth-century French chapel (now a flower shop) and incorporating seventeen fountains, some built with materials collected in Europe.[47]

In Santana Row, Federal Realty deliberately tried to recapture the allure of urban life. "Every city relies on

FIGURE 9. (LEFT) *As with Bay Street, four- and five-story mixed-use buildings frame Santana Row's heavily landscaped main street.*
FIGURE 10. (RIGHT) *Park Valencia, Santana Row. This 100-foot-by-150-foot area, framed by a hotel and mixed-use building, looks like a public park but is controlled by the private developers.*

vibrant neighborhoods," according to the company's promotional material. "For most, this means a place to relax, shop or meet a friend for coffee and a stroll along a sunny, tree-lined street. Our mission is to create urban spaces that are not just shopping centers, but dynamic, people- and pedestrian-oriented places that locals can look forward to visiting again and again."[48] At Santana Row, the avowed goal was also to create a "world-class Main Street, perhaps a new urban paradigm for America."[49]

Despite the promotional material, Federal Realty's experience has soured it to the concept of mixed-use Main Streets — in part because of unforeseen problems. After a disastrous fire at Santana Row in August 2002 (two months before its opening) and difficulty leasing its retail areas, its CEO, Steve Guttman, was forced to resign. Later that year the company officially announced that it would stop the risky practice of building mixed-use projects.[50] According to the current CEO, Don Wood, "building an instant city is considerably harder than a standard development. Santana Row took seven years to complete."[51]

Nevertheless, Santana Row benefits from one of the nation's most dynamic economies. The average household income within a four-mile radius is a stunning $112,000 — 2.6 times the national average.[52] And while the dot-com and housing busts have hurt Silicon Valley, the area remains an attractive market, and retailers can depend on a high "threshold demand."[53] Indeed, many of these residents can be seen cruising Santana Row's Main Street in Ferraris, Jaguars and Mercedes.

Despite the developer hype surrounding Santana Row, critics have attacked its staged aesthetic. John King of the *San Francisco Chronicle* called it "cubic zirconia of the highest grade . . . a make-believe Main Street filled with $285 scarves and $3,300 a month lofts."[54] He wryly noted that the new Main Street retail concept is little more than a shopping center with housing on top.[55] Meanwhile, Thaddeus Herrick of the *Wall Street Journal* called such places "faux downtowns."[56] *Metroactive's* Traci Vogel wrote that "Strolling around Santana Row . . . certainly doesn't feel like walking around in a mall. It feels more like walking around on a movie set. . . ."[57]

These are harsh words for what developers know is a popular "product." Yet they reflect its essential characteristics. In these hyperreal Main Streets, high-end apartments and perfectly proportioned streetscapes are not designed for lasting communities, but for hyperconsumption. Architect Victor Gruen learned much the same lesson in the 1960s. While he hoped his shopping malls would promote an American ideal and build community, they in fact produced settings where corporate capitalism could overpower local businesses.[58]

THE GREENE: A NEW TOWN FOR AN OLD SUBURB

Like other lifestyle centers, The Greene has housing, shops, restaurants, a movie theater, and a multilevel bookstore all designed around a Main Street theme (**FIG.11**). And like other centers, it is insulated from the surrounding context by parking lots and garages (**FIG.12**). Located on a 72-acre parcel in the affluent suburb of Beavercreek, the 800,000-square-foot center hopes to capitalize on what its developer, Steiner and Associates, called an "under-retailed and under-restauranted" area. How did the developer know the area was under-retailed? By comparing its retail square footage per capita (5.2) with the national average (6.3). This helped make the case that the area's 500,000 people would support a new "town center."

The Greene, however, may not be such a win-win project for Beavercreek. At the 1.1-million-square-foot Mall at Fairfield Commons just two miles north, signs of retail decay are already becoming evident: several big-box stores sit vacant, and numerous other smaller shops are underperforming.

In the cannibalistic world of shopping malls, Fairfield Commons superceded the Dayton Mall, two miles south of where The Greene has been built. And ten years ago it was

FIGURE 11. *Three levels of apartments sit atop The Greene's ground-floor retail. With its "village green," historical lamps, on-street parking, and wide sidewalks, the development provides a "public" realm in a city built without one.*

FIGURE 12. *The Greene's public face. Like Bay Street, the perimeter of this development is less than welcoming to its neighbors (a Tudor-style apartment complex can be seen in the background). Two parking garages (one shown above) and several surface lots form its defensive perimeter.*

Fairfield Commons that was making headlines. Since 1993, however, the hardwood forest where it was built has been transformed into a traffic-choked series of supercenters and parking lots. Meanwhile, the Dayton Mall has declined into a second-class venue with failing pavement in mostly empty parking lots, vacant shops, cracked floor tiles, and abandoned storefronts. The Greene may pose a similar threat for Fairfield Commons.

Like many other lifestyle centers, The Greene received public subsidies to support its $186 million construction cost — in this case $14.8 million in city-backed loans and special assessments to defray a portion of its infrastructure expenses.[59] This subsidy was not without critics. A local advocacy group, Citizens to Protect Taxpayers, formed to challenge the funding, and eventually collected 2,311 signatures to bring the matter to a public vote. However, in March of 2005, Beavercreek's city attorney, Stephen McHugh, invalidated the 199-sheet petition on a technicality: the group did not submit certified copies of city ordinances passed in support of the project with their petitions.

Following this decision, residents packed a city council meeting to protest the transfer of their tax dollars to a profitable developer. But it appeared the fix was in for Steiner and Associates; a little democracy was not going to slow the project. Flo Thompson, chairwoman of the citizens group said she did not know about the requirement to submit copies of the city's own ordinances with the petition, and the city did nothing to inform her of it.[60] And at the council meeting, Paula Baker, one of the petition-gatherers, compared developers to a swarm of locusts. "They come in and get the money and they are gone and we are left with what remains."[61]

Countering this sentiment were comments by Greene County Administrator Howard Poston, who argued that the development could have a $392 million economic impact. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for this area," he said. "If Greene County doesn't embrace this, other developers won't be as inclined to come to this area."[62] He could have added that The Greene's developer would likely have abandoned the project if not for the incentives.[63]

Eric Davis, a local business owner and opponent of the project made clear the connection between politicians and developers. "When I was starting my companies," he said, "I only wish I could have convinced city officials that it needed to fund my start-ups. The taxpayers just keep handing out blank checks, via their elected officials."[64]

During the project's planning-approval phase, the projected economic impact, calculated by consultants hired by the developer, also came under fire. "The developer is poaching local establishments, instead of bringing in new stores as promised," claimed Beavercreek resident Richard Docken.[65]

Complicating matters was that the City of Beavercreek collects no sales taxes; indeed, this is one reason why two of the area's three shopping malls were located there. The only revenue the city receives from these mammoth projects is property tax payments funneled to it through the county. Residents were thus further upset when they heard that the agreement granted the developer a 15 percent property tax reduction over a 25-year period. The proceeds would pay off bonds issued to pay for the infrastructure.

Beavercreek resident Victor Presutti explained the benefit to the developer. Although called a loan, $2.5 million (17 percent) would be repaid by the federal government, and $6.3 million (43 percent) would be repaid through tax-increment financing (diversion of a portion of the new property tax generated by the development). "Suppose you were offered a loan and didn't have to repay 17 percent because the American taxpayer was paying part of the loan," he said. "Then, another 43 percent would be forgiven because your property tax payments would be considered payment on the loan. Wouldn't you think you were getting a gift?"[66]

"It will be business as usual for Greene County, which never gives back any benefits or sales tax revenue to Beavercreek," said Thompson."[67] She added that although "they call it a town center or whatever they want, it's still a mall."[68]

Not all local residents were opposed to the project, however. Chris Walsh said he believed the new town center would "give the area more of a 'big city feel.'"[69]

With its mixed-use, multistory buildings and town square, The Greene does feel more urban than the Mall at Fairfield Commons. It is just this feel that has attracted retail tenants. "We had nosed around Dayton before," said Tim Hobart, franchise owner of BD's Mongolian Barbeque, "but this just made sense." He claimed that the developer's "Main Street-style developments have proven popular destinations for shoppers, diners, and entertainment seekers."[70]

The tenants also apparently believe the developer's claim that the "small-town setting with community gatherings (and) free events year-round, sets it apart." "People will stay at The Greene longer than anywhere else," said Steiner's Mike Duffey. "You don't say, 'Let's go out to dinner at the mall.' This is an experience where you can get white tablecloth dining, alfresco dining on a patio, or spend a significant amount of time relaxing."[71] And if shopping is involved, "that's great. It offers a full day of experience. You can go have lunch, do a movie, some shopping, and stay into the evening. You can even live there."[72]

Of course, this is exactly the aspect of a lifestyle center that a developer can market to prospective tenants. The longer patrons stay, the more money they are likely to spend. This is one reason lifestyle centers have higher sales per square foot than traditional shopping malls.

Steiner has developed other open-air lifestyle centers, but with its 136 apartments, The Greene is the first to incorporate a residential component. In terms of overall density, at 1.9 dwelling units/acre, however, its residential density is similar to that of the sprawling single-family subdivisions throughout Beavercreek.

Dave Brown of the South Beavercreek Neighborhood Association claimed that The Greene has been sold as urban-

FIGURES 13 AND 14. *Watching the new "public" realm. Private security guards patrol The Greene on its opening day (left). Local reporters, operating with permission of the owner, also showed up to document its opening.*

ism, but it is really sprawl. "This may indeed be sprawl," countered Beavercreek resident George Schumacher, "but until center cities can be made desirable for a majority of families, then we should be concerned with developing the right kind of sprawl, rather than condemning it, carte blanche."[73]

This raises two important questions. First, at such a low residential density, can The Greene be considered the "right kind" of sprawl — if there is such a thing? Second, who decides what is "right" in today's privatized economy? The Greene does include some housing on top of its shops. And it does provide places to gather in a city that has never before had them (apart from parking lots). However, at the same time that its developers crow about the environmental benefits of walkable communities, they market The Greene to retailers based on its regional location — a location that forces most visitors to arrive by car. Moreover, its "public" space is actually regulated private property.

The implication of this last distinction became clear opening day. As visitors jammed The Greene's stores, and its restaurants warned of two-hour waits — longer for seating outside in the sidewalk cafes — several members of Citizens to Protect Taxpayers staged a demonstration on the project's town green **(FIG.13,14)**. They carried placards that lambasted Steiner and Associates for "paving paradise," and for "Corporate Greede."

As a crowd began to materialize around the protestors, security guards moved in and told the demonstrators to leave. The audacity of this demand surprised the group — after all, the new town green had been advertised as a public space. They soon learned, however, that, despite appearances, nothing in The Greene was public — not its parking lots, not its streets, and certainly not its town green. The protestors stood firm, and one of the guards reached across a protestor's shoulder to grab her sign away. The commotion aroused the interest of the assembled media, and they began to snake through the crowd with their bulky cameras, lights, and microphones. However, alert to the prospect of negative publicity, Yaromir Steiner, himself, stepped in to diffuse the situation. He called off the guards and told the protestors they could stay.

This is the new reality of public space in America. While local governments see public space as a liability (operations and maintenance expenses are apparently hard to justify), private-sector developers see it as an opportunity. "We really see The Greene operating as a civic center where community events can occur," said Steiner's Mike Duffy.[74]

Regardless of who pays, people desire gathering spaces, and, in places like The Greene, they will pay for the privilege of accessing them through their purchases and dinner tabs. But it remains troubling that such spaces are actually private, and may be closed to debate as a matter of policy, or on the whim of an owner.

"PUBLIC" OR "PRIVATE": WHAT ROLE FOR *CIVITAS*?

Like the climate-controlled "streets" of enclosed shopping malls, the Main Streets and town greens of today's lifestyle centers are privately controlled stage sets that mask frenzied consumption in a nostalgic veneer of familiarity and community. Developers build ground-floor retail below several floors of apartments; they set these mixed-use buildings along a narrow three- or four-block street; they include parallel parking, street trees, and wide sidewalks; and they add "public" spaces like plazas and greens as the new anchors. But they do all of this to enhance the retail experience and boost profits, not create *civitas*.

A simulacrum, according to Baudrillard, is a reality in its own right, not a mere reproduction of the real. He argued that the simulacrum is therefore hyperreal, with little relation to the reality it mimics. Lifestyle centers are hyperreal manifestations of the traditional American Main Street. In their case, the underlying socioeconomic justification for the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Main Street —

FIGURE 15. *The typical tenants at today's lifestyle centers: high-end clothes, moderne furniture, and franchised food.*

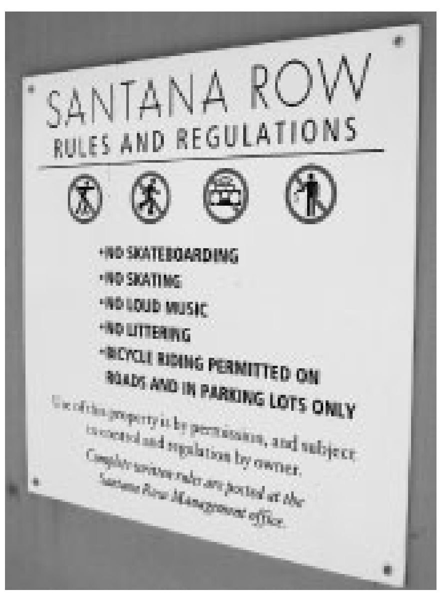
small-scale, localized capitalism — has been replaced by globalized brand-name merchandizing (**FIG.15**). Thus, the simulacrum does have a prototype, the traditional Main Street, but it bears very little resemblance to its foundational reality. In particular, it is divorced from the socio-spatial conditions that once supported these traditional centers.

Although the image of Main Street may remain in the lifestyle center, the economic system, spatial location, contextual linkages, and architectural types are all different. For example, the public and institutional buildings that were once woven into the fabric of a traditional Main Street are nowhere to be seen. And the public parks and town squares that integrated with traditional Main Streets have been replaced by privately controlled outdoor plazas and wide sidewalks designed to support cafe seating and window-shopping, but not public gathering.

While developers hope to capitalize on the popularity of the model, the ensuing privatization of formerly public space is a degradation of the historic Main Street model. Developers are using their resources to build new town centers in places abandoned by real towns. They are building parks and plazas as public gathering places for paying customers only, and they are regulating these places to ward off the ill effects of public life — from skateboarders to parked cars (**FIGS.16,17**). They can do this because these streets are private enclaves designed only with the needs and comforts of the residents and shoppers in mind.

Like Disney's Main Street, U.S.A., lifestyle centers segregate themselves from the larger community. They withdraw from the real public realm — from its congested arterials, isolated land use zones, and inadequate public spaces. On large parcels at the suburban fringe or next to Interstate highways, they create a fantasy shopping experience, insulated by parking lots, garages, and blank walls.

In the present era of municipal decline, cities have largely given up making real town centers. Their parks are an undue maintenance burden, and their streets are too expensive to build and maintain. With cities abandoning their role to create a public realm, developers have stepped in to fill it. But the lifestyle centers they are building are based less on the Main Streets whose imagery they are borrowing than on the shopping malls they are fast replacing.



FIGURES 16 AND 17. *Regulating the new "public" realm.*

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All photos are by the author unless otherwise noted.