



FEATURE



## Trading on Main Street: Creating the Ultimate Retail Experience

[By Ted Van Dyk, AIA, Principal of New City Design Group]

Most of us are too young to remember a time when consumer goods were scarce. For today's consumer shopping is more than a necessity. It is a form of entertainment.

Retailers know that if consumers are at ease and are having fun, then they will spend money. Many see visiting a shopping center as an event in itself.

This is not news. Our country has shared in the rich tradition of county fairs and markets, shopping, and entertainment for generations. Our own North Carolina State Fair combines consumption, display of goods, and entertainment into one large unbroken experience.

### The Main Street Experience

One of the country's first enclosed malls, Stonestown Mall in San Francisco, included an amusement park on its roof when it opened in 1959. The giant Mall of America in Minneapolis combines shopping with an indoor amusement park. Potomac Mills Mall in Northern Virginia is the state's most visited tourist site.

Our best retail environments reflect the influence of this long-standing trend. One of the most prevalent retail environments is the Main Street-themed center. From the smallest suburban strip to power malls such as Crabtree Valley Mall in Raleigh and The Streets at Southpoint in Durham, the trend today is to replicate, in some form or another, the feel of a diverse, eclectic Main Street.

Places like Brier Creek and Alexander Place offer varied colors, different façade

heights and styles, canvas awnings, and lots of gooseneck lights. These markers are descendants of the ideal of Main Street. Not surprisingly, this Main Street aesthetic is the descendant of the entertainment industry, as well as one of its greatest visionaries.

Walt Disney opened Disneyland in 1959 and Disney World in 1970. Each park was a three-dimensional re-creation of the many themes and settings from his movies and television shows. It was entertainment in built form. Disney was a master of illusion. His parks are paragons of high craft, attention to detail, and dedication to service, and central to each park is Main Street.

Nestled into a theme park, Disney's Main Street makes no pretense of being a real street. Storefronts are souvenir shops, refreshment outlets, and entries to rides and attractions, while false second floors with blacked-out windows are in place merely to strengthen the illusion.

It is no surprise to discover that our current design trends in retail favor these same devices, although without the explicit cues of admission gates or long lines and often without Disney's commitment to craft.

### Storefront Appeal

The Main Street look signals a sense of variety, as well as the ideals of traditional Main Street as a gathering place for

community, small-town values, ice-cream parlors, strolls along the sidewalk, and entertainment. The form reflects a harkening back to some imagined simpler time, a call to engage in the same kind of diversion and a bit of the escape that Disney offered.

Like so many good ideas, however, this look has been used and recycled so much that it has lost some of its allure. The consumer knows that the strip center, whether long and low or adorned with colorful storefronts and canopies, likely will offer little more than the lineup of usual retailing suspects.

As the Main Street idea has developed, however, some best practices have emerged as well. For example, higher-quality centers have installed fountains, benches, public art, and other amenities to offer more of a retailing environment.

As consumers develop more sophisticated tastes — and as each center continues to compete for customers — the Main Street ideal continues to be useful. As uses mix together — for example, if those second-floor windows become real offices or condos — the level of energy, interest, and diversity of a development tends to increase.

Just as Disney's team must seek out more sophisticated means of animating films to capture savvy viewers, retailers are crafting environments with more



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sophisticated programs and breadths of use. In the Triangle, North Hills has subjugated much of its parking below ground and offers a healthy mix of retail, movie theaters, offices, restaurants, and condominiums, with a hotel currently under development.

We can hope for more development in this vein as consumers realize that it takes more than a colorful façade to make a Main Street. As the concept of mixed use continues to evolve, one can hope for additional public space incorporated into the mix.

**About the Author**

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