2014

Faces of Main Street: Waterloo

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Faces of Main Street
Waterloo

Antonio Scontrino
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Faces of Main Street: Waterloo
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Acknowledgments

I am sincerely grateful to all the business owners who allowed me to interrupt their daily activities to accomplish this project.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to the Main Street Waterloo Program for facilitating and introducing me to the local business community.

The support of Waterloo Center for the Arts gave me the chance to share my passion with the community.

A special thanks to Steve Mager who was always available to assist me during this project. You have been a tremendous source of energy, and a good friend.

"BY NOW I’VE LEARNED THAT THE MOST IMPORTANT THING TO DO WHEN YOU PHOTOGRAPH SOMEBODY IN A ROOM OR OUTSIDE IS NOT TO LOOK AT THE SUBJECT, BUT AT THE BACKGROUND."

- ALFRED EISENSTAEDT -
Foreword

As I look age 40 in the face, I have often thought of the changes I’ve seen living in Iowa most of my life. I’ve seen the rise and fall of numerous shopping malls, the birth of internet commerce, and the eventual domination of consumer dollars by large, cookie-cutter juggernauts. National chains have extended their hold in retail, dining, grocery stores, gas stations etc. to an almost unbelievable scale. Throughout all of this, one thing that hasn’t changed is the complete dependency on the automobile to get practically everywhere.

All of these factors contributed to the demise of our downtowns. When I was a kid, growing up in a small town in the 1980s, (Manson, Iowa, population 1700), we had two grocery stores, a men’s clothing store, a women’s clothing store, a variety store, and several independent restaurants. Much of that eventually disappeared. Not coincidentally, it was not uncommon for residents of our small community to drive 20 miles to buy groceries at a big box store, as opposed to walking two blocks to buy things locally.

It was the same in most communities. As a result, a shocking level of decay set into our historic downtowns. Being a history lover, I always found this puzzling. How could these treasures be allowed rot away before our eyes? Shouldn’t something be done? Didn’t anybody care? It was really only through my involvement with Main Street that I really looked at this problem squarely in the face. The decay of our historic downtowns is, at its core, the result of our economic choices. It is the product of suburbanization, automobile worship, cheap imported goods, and corporate money and power. But before we point too many fingers, it is also the result of a consumer base that all too often flocks to whatever is cheapest and easiest to get its hands on. In other words, as Pogo the Possum once famously quipped: we have met the enemy…and it is us.

A small but growing contingency of both entrepreneurs and consumers want something better. They have watched, considered, and learned from what they have observed. Their conclusion can be simply summed up: there is a high cost to these low prices. The price we pay is the loss of what made our individual communities special and worth living in to begin with. In addition, of course, there are environmental costs, health costs, and economic costs far too numerous to attend to in this short essay.

Antonio Scontrino, as a professor of photography and visual communication, clearly wants to be part of this good fight when it comes to preserving our unique downtowns. He has experienced the “little guys” holding their own. His photo documentation offers a select sampling of our downtown community here in Waterloo, Iowa. This project shows the intimate connection between these individuals and the unique businesses enterprises they operate. Antonio brilliantly captures how these businesses are, in many ways, simply an extension of the proprietor’s own persona. In their own way, the people in this artistic display are themselves artists…people who simply needed to create, who want to leave a piece of themselves behind. They had a vision, a vision which they passionately pursued to make a reality. For many of them, working a nine to five for a national chain is completely out of the question. The people in these photos represent a different path.
Every one of these photos is a unique story. These stories are worth learning and supporting if we, as a community, value a vibrant sense of place where we choose to live. We vote with our feet and with our dollars. Who do you choose to support? What kind of community do you want to live in? Somehow, some way, creativity and intelligence often finds like-minds, like some strange law of attraction. People can often sense a vibe of artistry and creativity in a community (or a lack thereof) almost immediately.

I am of a mind that we have started to attract this vibe in downtown Waterloo. People come because they value the unique architecture, the eclectic diverse population, or the geographic location...but oftentimes, too, I think they come because they want to be a part of that unique and creative community. Really, at the end of the day, if you want to make a place special, you need to attract creative, talented people. It is as simple as that.

"Faces of Main Street" has given us the chance to once again become personal with our small business owners whose eyes and posture reveal their resilience, determination, passion, and hope.

Allow us to introduce just such a group!

Jeffrey J. Kurtz,
Executive Director Main Street Waterloo
Introduction

The purpose of this photographic project is to capture local business owners and managers downtown Waterloo, Iowa. *Faces of Main Street* sets out to remind us of the importance of small businesses and the real people behind the day-to-day operations of these entities. They are the faces of our economy that can easily be overlooked in political and social discourses. This work is an intimate look at individuals possessing the entrepreneurial spirit. In their eyes, you will see passion for their work and the determination to succeed. The photographic images are a reminder to us all that downtown small business owners are our extended family who must be respected and supported.

For me, photography, is not a job, but a passion. Through my lens, I document experiences, and capture lives. I transform images into scenes to be interpreted within a social context. In this work, I wanted to show people who are impacting their communities by making downtown Waterloo a wonderful and vibrant place where families can enjoy shopping and walking.

The approach with this project was extremely spontaneous. Rain or shine, I would walk around downtown and randomly enter businesses, explain the project to the owners, and once they agreed, I asked them to pose. There was no preparation from their side, but kindness and willingness to participate. The photos of these individuals were taken with a lot of improvisation and with very limited time.

Everything you see is real. Essentially, there was no staging, and the businesses were captured in their natural state. I chose to print the images directly from my camera files, with no digital retouches because I wanted to show the business owners and managers in a realistic way. The goal was to present the true faces of Main Street.

Antonio Scontrino.
Revitalizing U.S. Main Street in Rural Downtowns

I. INTRODUCTION

Like many small cities, Waterloo is experiencing the challenge of attracting retail businesses and promoting customer loyalty in the downtown area. Retaining and attracting small business is a major challenge as small businesses are critical to local economy of rural downtown development. As small businesses are a source of economic vitality, it is imperative to identify resources that would enable business owners to compete. Community leaders can be a strategic component to effectively develop their commercial district. There has been an increase in Main Street Programs as a means of bolstering economic revitalization of downtown business community. The Program utilizes individuals with diverse expertise and backgrounds to help develop downtown resources through facilitation and collaboration efforts.

II. MAIN STREET WATERLOO PROGRAM

The Main Street Waterloo Program values are drawn from the Downtown Waterloo vision statement, which hopes to continue to position itself as the center for business and culture in the Northeast Iowa. Being strategically located, clean, safe, aesthetically pleasing environment downtown has economic potential. There is a focus on trade, entertainment, and retailing to meet the needs of customers. Developments of an office park and residential units are discussed. There is a vision to restore vibrancy and excitement in the center where people gather. There is an articulation of accomplishments in the new recreational areas for families and friends. The vision statement embraces Downtown Waterloo's architectural and cultural diversity as some of its greatest assets that will encourage people to contribute to the revitalization process of Downtown. The Main Street Waterloo Program values are drawn from the Downtown Waterloo vision statement which hopes to continue to position itself as the center for business and culture in the Northeast Iowa. Being strategically located, clean, safe, aesthetically pleasing environment downtown has economic potential. There is a focus on trade, entertainment, and retailing to meet the needs of customers. Developments of office park and residential units are discussed. There is a vision of restoring vibrancy and excitement in the center where people gather. There is an articulation of accomplishments in the new recreational areas for families and friends. The vision statement embraces Downtown Waterloo's architectural and cultural diversity as some of its greatest assets that will encourage people to contribute to the revitalization process of Downtown. In the historical center of Waterloo, there are approximately 43 small retail businesses. This includes nine apparel, antiques, and accessories stores, six grocery stores, three jewelry stores/pawn shops, and 25 food/beverage/entertainment businesses. Except for restaurants and bars, stores tend to close at 4 or 5PM. This community prides itself on its cultural diversity and hosting events that showcase its diversity to visitors and residents. Waterloo downtown, like many across the US, is facing the challenge of attracting people to the downtown area even after adopting the Main Street Approach in 1996.
III. RURAL DOWNTOWNS

US rural downtowns are still contending with the issue of developing their commercial districts. Some of the key factors the lack of entrepreneurship, leadership, innovation, infrastructure, and financing (Johnson, 1988). At a time of economic development awareness, social challenges continue to deter the revitalization process as the bulk of consumers shop on the outskirts of town, ignoring downtowns (Lawhead, 1995). The lack of resources and competition from conglomerates are contributing to the closing of many businesses in small cities (Clarkin, 1998). There are major trends to bring economic vitality back to downtown. This is being realized through restoration and enhancement of nature spaces, combining commercial and residential functions in multistory buildings, cultural activities, the arts, and entertainment facilities (Kemp, 2011). He makes the appeal to educational institutions and nonprofit organizations to assist in attracting and retaining smaller specialized businesses downtown. He also encouraged the inclusion of ethnic and niche businesses. Kemp (2011) expressed optimism about the ability of downtowns to be transformed into vibrant and energetic community spaces.

Main Street Programs

Founded on the concept of economic development within the framework of historic preservation, the Main Street Program was launched in 1977 by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The study was a strategic response to address the decaying commercial districts across the country. The work identified factors contributing to their economic distress, and developed a comprehensive revitalization strategy that would encourage economic development. The Main Street Program is utilized by 2,000 communities in 42 states. Using this approach, 33 Iowa downtowns are working to strengthen the overall social and economic health of their central business districts. They work to re-establish their commercial districts as the community focal point. Lawhead’s (1995) study on Main Street approach illustrated that rural downtown economic revitalization is based on four principles: design, organization, promotion, and economic restructuring. The Design principle is responsible for improving and enhancing the physical appearance of downtown. The Organization principle requires the forging of relationships through consensus and cooperation between downtown stakeholders. The Promotion principle involves marketing the unique characteristics of downtown in order to attract customers, new businesses, and tourists. The Economic principle focuses on improving the current economic base of downtown, and work to diversify it. It also entails helping the growth of the small businesses, recruiting new ventures, and renovating unused spaces. These initiatives ultimately transform downtown into a place where merchants can become more competitive.

The Main Street approach allows for new development that is compatible with the existing downtown physical environment. A community is able to re-establish its self-reliance and rebuild its downtown, based on downtown’s traditional assets: 1) personal service, 2) local ownership, 3) unique architecture and 4) a sense of community. Since the 1990s, there has been an increase of Main Street Programs to bolster economic sustainability of the downtown business community.

Challenges and Solutions

Lawhead (1995) made the case that three out of five common challenges of downtown enterprises are directly related to the fact that: 1) sales are leaked out to surrounding shopping malls, 2) challenge in marketing of existing businesses to potential customers, and 3) operating with insufficient capital or financial resources. He stressed the importance of customer service, which entails providing an attractive and friendly environment. Addressing the diverse needs of customers can be a challenge for small retail businesses, given their limited resources. Lawhead (1995) study was conducted over fifteen years ago, yet these issues confronting remain the same. In order to compete in this market, he recommends that businesses strengthen customer loyalty, continue important goods and services, gain credibility, and improve operating methods.

Even with the awareness to revitalize U.S. rural Main Street, bringing more retail businesses and customers downtown is a major challenge (Ryu & Swinney, 2011). Rural and small downtown businesses are characterized by their flexibility, ad hoc behavior and shortage of resources and technology according to Berrander and Meldrum (2000), unlike corporations with whom they are competing. Although many entrepreneurs start their businesses out of passion, resources are essential in order to compete and remain in the market. As a result of Ryu and Swinney (2011) study, promoting the concept of branding U.S. downtowns can improve business performance.

There is no doubt that small businesses are vital to our economic prosperity. Small businesses are key drivers of innovation, employment, and economic prosperity; however, information is required to gain competitiveness advantages, increase access to markets, and gain profit (Lee, & McGuigan, 2009). Small business owners play a pivotal role in business creation and developing resources which contribute to the local economy. Johnson (1989) made the case that U.S. rural areas are facing global competition. He predicted that revitalization may be limited due to the lack of entrepreneurial leadership, a characteristic which can influence innovation. This, he believes, is where the greatest achievement will be attained. Chell and Baines (2000), who studied the networking behavior of microbusinesses, discover the need for economic development agents to utilize tools for the differentiation of the business owner-managed population. Concerned that the U.S. retailing Main Street communities is becoming isolated in the midst of super-power retail stores, Clarkin (1998) reassured that addressing customer needs are vital to success. He highlighted that, in delivering products and services to customers, business owners should pay attention to value, and product choices. Owners must also redesign their spaces, and be positioned in a convenient location for attract customers. According to his study, parking, and hours of operation are also critical when addressing customer service downtown.

Technological advancement has impacted business delivery system, thus, altering dramatically the relationship that businesses create with customers. According to Stevens, Loudon, and Cole (2002), the Internet is the most pervasive technology that enables diverse transactions and the acquisition of information to improve individual and organizational performance. Hence, it is a source of empowerment for small businesses as it provides them with the capability to compete. It is becoming evident that the employment of technology for information and communication purposes is a critical component for small business growth. This gives owners and managers access to information about products, processes, and customers to whom they are able to market instantly (De Berrander, & Meldrum, 2000). It was predicted by Sharples (1998), that a growing number of businesses would begin to use the Internet for increasing productivity and improving operations.
The use of the Internet for making transactions has become friendlier. And as a result of the social media, there is ... resolved, and 9) remembering that every community is unique and development must therefore be customized.

The relationship between technology and micro-businesses is still fragmented as they are not discussed widely in the literature. Internet services have become less expensive in recent years, yet, a majority of U.S. Main Street micro-businesses have not fully employed Internet technology as a means of competing. According to Schoenacher’s (2011) study only 24% of businesses used email daily, 42% never availed themselves to email, 56% did not obtain Internet business news, which caused them to lose out of valuable information about customers and the market. Downtown businesses in rural areas are collectively responsible for creating a unique and dynamic experience. Although Main Street merchants must work to connect with a new shopping culture using electronic media, it is also important to identify their values and causes as a way to compete with larger retail entities. The reality is that U.S. downtowns continue to experience obstacles due to lack of resources, and stifling competition from corporations. Schoenacher (2011) articulated that vulnerable micro-businesses across the U.S. are in need of training on how to use the Internet effectively to gather information about suppliers, and goods. It is also crucial for small businesses to learn how to conduct promotions and sales of their own products as a new generation of ‘internet-centric’ can contribute to the growth of small community businesses.

Community leaders can be a strategic component to effectively develop their commercial district. There has been an increase in Main Street Programs as a means of bolstering economic revitalization of downtown business community. For the economic revitalization of Main Street, community leadership is imperative, and requires collaboration among all stakeholders. Information in order to effectively manage the program is imperative. Having an understanding of economic development is important for the community development leaders who have to navigate among diverse stakeholders. Critical to the sustainability of the local market, leaders must be able to reposition the business district through encouragement, development, and implementations of strategies for the purpose of retaining existing business and obtaining new ventures.

The economic revitalization teams are core strategy for providing resources to improve the competitive advantage of downtown merchants. Chambers, Clemons, and Foster (1990) conducted a study on Rural Revitalization. In their findings, community leaders are identified as fundamental component of community development. Their responsibilities entail 1) increasing raining capacity, 2) providing support, 3) incorporating broad base of citizenry, 4) building relationship, and 5) developing conflict resolution skills and a team mentality around leadership. As every community is unique, Chambers, et al. (1990) also found that leadership at the local level is based on values. Leadership teams responsible for economic revitalization are responsible for developing a high level of competencies. They must be knowledgeable of economic development, and have a high level of interpersonal skills for engaging with public and private groups, and be willing to take directions from board of residence, elected officials, and business owners.

Roth (2011) advocated for a relationship between universities and community leaders, and expresses that it is an effective strategic approach for rural development. He states that business and community leaders must look for opportunities to partner with universities on projects that benefit a broad sector of the community. Amirkhanian and Habiby (2003) discussed the role of community and business leaders as collaborators with universities for economic revitalization. They discourage local leaders from seeking funding from the university as a solution; instead, they must work to develop business partnerships. In their study, Amirkhanian and Habiby (2003) identified purchasing, employer, real estate development, incubator, business advisor, and workforce developer as six university resources that can contribute to downtown development. There is also the opportunity of recruiting and developing local residents. With an increase in student enrollment, real estate developers may work with the university to provide accommodation for students and faculty. This may prompt response to improve the atmosphere of perceived risky areas. Other options are student-operated technology-based incubator programs that can serve the needs of local organizations and corporations. Professors and students can serve as resources to improve local businesses. This form of relationship provides a situation whereby students obtain hands-on learning experience.

Business leadership is an essential component of the development process (Robertson & Ryan, 2004). In the process of revitalizing the local economy, Chambers, Clemons, and Foster (1990) identified several factors for effective community leadership: 1) training is imperative for increasing leadership capacity, 2) leaders must not underestimate human potential, 3) citizenry is a critical component for revitalization, 4) techniques to improve consensus and resolve conflicts with teams are essential, 5) team-building is vital to leadership, 6) promoting action-oriented learning as people are experiential learners, 7) being aware that most of the challenges are values based and the knowledge that expertise cannot solve the local problems, 8) understanding that conflicts are problems to be immediately resolved, and 9) remembering that every community is unique and development must therefore be customized.
IV. STUDY

A study was conducted to identify some of the challenges faced by small businesses downtown Waterloo. This study is guided by the review of literature, questionnaire, and interviews. A questionnaire was sent out to generate response to community leaders. There are 40 individuals identified, only nine responded to the questionnaire. Questions asked were:
1) What do you perceive as an Ideal Achievement for developing Downtown Waterloo?
2) What do you perceive as a Critical Roadblock (challenge) to each achievement?
3) What is your General Outlook on overcoming each challenge?

i. Ideal Achievement
The average issues identified were retail options for economic vitality, downtown housing for middle come earners, the eradication of negative perceptions of downtown, and cleanliness of downtown. One individual stated that the "cooperation of all players" would be an ideal achievement situation. Another focused on the marketing by third party agents to bring new businesses to downtown.

Level of Importance (Ideal Achievement)
1st More Retail
2nd Better Image/Atmosphere
3rd Improving Housing/Residential Community
4th Increasing Tourism

ii. Roadblocks
The more common issues presented as challenges to the downtown development were lack of funding, tax incentives, and/or investment (for small businesses, or residential development, or revitalization projects). One individual mentioned negative thinking populace as a barrier to growth, and another reported that there is bias based on the reputation of the City.
iii. Outlook

Most of the respondents provided solutions for the Roadblocks (challenges) that they identified. For retail development, there were responses around the importance of advocacy relating to tax and securing retail space, marketing/publicity, and loans. To address downtown housing issues, there was an emphasis on educating owners about grants, and encouraging them to invest in residential development. In order to address the negative perception and unclean/unsafe environment, it was recommended to find ways to get people to experience downtown, and to collaborate with the city, and business owners.

V. CONCLUSION

Waterloo is an important city during U.S. Presidential Campaigns. In the recent political debates, candidates intensely argued about the needs of “Main Street” versus “Wall Street.” We, as consumers must become patrons of these small businesses as they are vital to the prosperity of local communities. Many economic development researchers are highly optimistic about the potential transformation that can take place to create a more inviting and suitable environment in U.S. downtowns. Adapting to change is essential for the sustainability of any business. Main Street merchants must work to connect with a new generation of consumers using communication technology. Failing to change one’s mindset and operation can be a contributing factor to the isolation of Main Street by customers. Small business owners are encouraged to identify the changing social values of consumers in order to be more competitive. They must work to create a unique and dynamic experience for all customers. As a support, economic development teams are instrumental to downtown and must strive to create value by repositioning the business district in the marketplace. This can occur by developing strategies to 1) promote downtown communities, 2) provide incentives for business retention, and 3) encourage and facilitate expansion efforts. Both community and business leaders must value education, training, and empowerment through a collaborative effort to bring people back on Main Street. With this in mind, the images by Antonio Scontrino are meant to remind us that small businesses on U.S. Main Streets are significant to economic sustainability. These businesses must once again become the engine that drives our economy.

REFERENCES

Faces of Main Street

Antonio Scontrino.
Afton Wilson, Owner
FUSION DANCE & FITNESS
John Hayes, Owner
KING'S and QUEEN'S BAR
Theresa Kurtz and Brandon Le Gagnon, Owners
THE BROKEN RECORD RETRO BAR
Natalie Mormann, Owner
THE BRIDE’S CORNER
John Eveland, President
NATIONAL CIGAR STORE
Randolph Bryon, Owner
COTTONWOOD Canyon Coffee Shop
Dixie Smith, Owner
DIXIE’S SCHOOL of DANCE and TUMBLING
Joanna Landau, Owner
BROWN BOTTLE RESTAURANT
Gloria Mincks, Owner
NANA’S ORIENTAL GROCERY STORE
Steve Cunningham, General Manager & Mark Widmann, Chef
CU RESTAURANT & THE CELLAR
Miguel Palomares, Owner
EL PATRON, Mexican Restaurant
Julie Kiefer, Vendor
RIVERLOOP PUBLIC MARKET CO-OP
Tim Lindgren, President
LINDGREN GLASS
Press Release
Photo display captures slice of downtown Waterloo

September 28, 2013 5:49 am by St. John Diemer

A WATERLOO: Sometimes it takes a fresh look to see what you already have.

Photo credit: "House of Blues," features photographs of business people in downtown Waterloo.

Businesses are open and breathing with a new life, as the city undergoes a revival.

Sharon has been considering a career in photography for the past year. "I love the way the photos tell a story," she says.

Sharon was inspired by the work of photographers who have made their mark.

"I hope that people will come out and see the photos," she says. "It's a way to bring people together.

The results can be a little bit of a surprise sometimes, I think.

"It's a wonderful, wonderful concept, but it's not easy to capture," she says.

Sharon's photos have been featured in local publications.

Sharon is a professional photographer and graphic designer whose work has been exhibited in Italy, France, Russia, and Germany.

Photographs by Antonio Scontrino

Sat, Nov 2 2013, 10:00 am - 5:00 pm pm CDT

Repeats every day until Saturday, May 31, 2014

West Galleries

On display beginning September 23, 2013

Originally from Italy, photographer and designer Antonio Scontrino came to the Cedar Valley in 2011 to accept a teaching position at the University of Northern Iowa.

Scontrino quickly embraced our community and was impressed by the passionate, dedicated and diverse group of businesspeople working to transform downtown Waterloo.

Scontrino was inspired to present this series of portraits depicting individuals operating businesses along 4th Street.

Website: http://waterloocenterforthearts.org
West Gallery

This gallery features changing exhibits, displayed outside the Schoen Room on the main floor of WCA’s west wing.

Current Exhibition:

Photographs by Antonio Scontrino

FACES OF MAIN STREET

Originally from Italy, photographer and designer Antonio Scontrino came to the Cedar Valley in 2011 to accept a teaching position at the University of Northern Iowa. Scontrino quickly embraced our community and was impressed by the passionate, dedicated and diverse group of businesspeople working to transform downtown Waterloo. Scontrino was inspired to present this series of portraits depicting individuals operating businesses along 4th Street.

Classes & Workshops

Click here to download our WCA Schedule
Dr. Antonio Scontrino is currently tenure-track professor of photography and video production within the Visual Communication Technology program at Bowling Green State University. He collaborates with scholars on design and business projects. Antonio has numerous creative works in international publications. He has also had peer reviewed articles written about his work that was exhibited at the New Britain Museum of American Art in Connecticut.

“Though my lenses, I seek to document experiences, and capture scenes, and events as I see them. It is a pleasure to share the beauty and diversity of the world.”