

# ForumJournal

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## Relevance and Resilience: Proceedings from PastForward Online 2020

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National Trust *for* Historic Preservation

**Preservation  
Leadership Forum**

# Looking Back, Looking Ahead: Four Decades on Main Street

MARY MEANS

**T**oday I want to take you back a long, long time—even before the internet and Google.

It was the 1970s. My job with the National Trust was to foster the growth of historic preservation in the Midwest. Traveling around its 10 states, meeting advocates, skeptics—who included nearly everyone in power.

I discovered that, while there were fine architectural landmarks, the most striking and neglected historic resource was the town center—its Main Street.

There, the whole of it with its 19th- and early-20th-century buildings was much more than its parts. Yet Main Street was so familiar, and its deterioration had been so gradual, that it was taken for granted.

As was the migration out—business was moving to highways or to shopping centers, draining the life from Main Street.

The pattern was widespread: Fine buildings, often covered in modernized slipcovers, were at risk and their value not recognized.

**The Main Street team retreat in 1979 at a very cold Wisconsin camp where they brainstormed two years of experience into what became the Four Point Approach.**

PHOTO CREDIT JAMES STOCKARD



Preservation was an alien idea, thought suitable only for places with genuine historic significance. These were just old buildings.

The reason I opened with the pre-internet remark is that in the 1970s information was very hard to come by. One couldn't just ask the Google "how do I bring our town center back?" This was also the time before adaptive use became common. Again, there were very few examples to point to.

There were only two of us on staff in the Trust office for the Midwest, and very few local preservation organizations. So we weren't going to make any headway if we couldn't address two related issues:

First, town centers—Main Streets—were being left behind as relics. If we were going to make preservation work, we had to find ways for communities to save them, to bring them back to life.

Second, and directly related, advocates for preservation were passionate, but seldom in power. Those who held power were at best skeptical about preservation. They viewed us as seeing the world through curatorial eyes, seeking architectural perfection—and that was expensive. We had to make believers, and the best way to do that was to make preservation matter to them. Who were those with power? Businesspeople. If we could make preservation work downtown, we could address both of these overarching issues.

So with the naivete of youth, we set out to do this. We proposed the Main Street Project. The National Endowment for the Arts believed in us and awarded us \$50,000—their maximum—to get started (probably the most highly leveraged grant they ever gave!). A benevolent manufacturer of building materials put up the rest, paying for the three-year experiment.

We would work in three towns—Galesburg, Illinois; Hot Springs, South Dakota; and Madison, Indiana—to learn what worked, then we'd hold conferences, write a book, and make a film. We'd do all this in three years. And we would document it so we could prove, as our tagline rashly promised, you could have "economic development within the context of historic preservation."

It worked. From the experience gained in the three towns we learned a lot.



**In 1976, the National Trust for Historic Preservation chose Madison as one of three cities to be part of its pilot Main Street program**

PHOTO CREDIT: MAIN STREET AMERICA

Most important, we learned the vital ingredient was the presence of an energetic, savvy “Main Street manager” to orchestrate volunteers. And we learned the power of story—or vision, if you will.

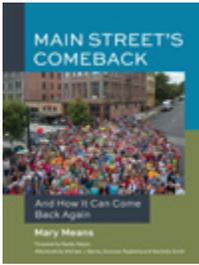
The common wisdom of the time was “head out, downtown is dead.” Spoken or not, it was the inner voice in towns and cities across the country. It has been said that the Main Street Project brought a new narrative: “No it isn’t, it’s the heart of your community and you can do something about it.”

From the get-go, the media jumped on it—it was a natural David and Goliath story. The film [Main Street](#) came out in 1979 and became a Rotary and Kiwanis lunchtime hit. Soon hundreds of towns were calling and writing letters to the Trust—no email yet!

The National Trust had never seen anything like it. Nothing it had done had ever gained this much traction—and it was happening well beyond the Midwest.

Instead of riding off into the sunset at the end of three years, we managed to attract the funding to take the [Main Street Approach](#) to scale—trying it out in six states, each with five towns. Thus was born the National Main Street Center. The hope was that states would be the platform for networks of strong Main Street towns. And, as you know, they are today.

Over the last two years, I’ve been thinking a lot about how all this came about, why it worked, why it spread, and how it has endured for 40 years. I’d left the world of Main Street in the mid-1980s and had been running a small but mighty planning firm.



When I returned to find out what had happened, I was blown away by the spread, the economic impact. It's a story that has flown under the radar of mainstream economists and preservationists. So I decided to write a book about it. I called it *Main Street's Comeback*.

As I was finishing it, the pandemic changed everything, including the book. It is now titled [\*Main Street's Comeback and How It Can Come Back Again\*](#).

## **A FORCE FOR RECOVERY**

The damage of the pandemic is profound. Beyond the tragic and rising death toll, it is truly an existential crisis, nowhere more so than on Main Street.

Those of you who have worked there so hard and so long know it well. But most Main Streets have weathered existential crises before—think of the Great Depression's breadlines passing boarded up stores. Think of the flight to the suburbs and to regional shopping centers. Main Street has even survived—so far—the mighty Amazon.

And unlike 40 years ago, they have two things going for them: The buildings are in good condition; and, most of all, there are now skilled, dedicated Main Street organizations. These vital nodes of leadership embody years of experience working together and building trust.

Together, Main Street's 1,600 towns and 39 states are an invisible system for recovery. It is time to lift it up and make it visible. This is the resilient network that is poised for regeneration. You are regenerators. That's the term used by urban economist Bruce Katz, formerly of Brookings Institution, to name the vital engine of recovery. Keeping this web together and strengthening it is the purpose of the legislation Main Street America and others are pushing for. Why? Because as Katz puts it, "The notion that a quick revival of Main Streets will be driven by millions of individual small businesses acting on their own defies the laws of finance."

He and we know that recovery is inextricably linked to the recovery of places, not just small businesses. The vital ingredient for both is the presence of these regenerators, and many of these vital



**Businesses participating in #AWorldOfHearts around West Chester, Pennsylvania.**

CREDIT: DOWNTOWN WEST CHESTER

institutions are themselves in financial distress. Thus the critical need for federal funding to keep the regeneration web together. The leaders among you are already actively building a groundswell of support at all levels. Everyone needs to get involved.

We live in a fractured, divided nation. Main Street is nonpartisan. It belongs to everybody. It takes inspired leadership to keep it that way, to enable it to remain the heart of the whole community. There are states that have lost their Main Street programs due to changes in administrations. Those that have endured have weathered the storms of regime change.

Texas and North Carolina are outstanding examples. Both have been in the Main Street network since its inception 40 years ago.

Some say Texas’s magic ingredient was Anice Read, the force of nature who headed the state program for its first 16 years. Anice cooked up the First Lady’s visit—inviting the wife of the current governor to tour new Main Street communities to congratulate them. They loved it from the start and passed the word to their successors that it’s the best part of the job. Legislators know it too. Main Street is nearly as sacred in Texas as Friday night football.

Similarly, the North Carolina Main Street program has not only survived but grown since it was named one of the first Main Street states in 1980. North Carolina is a “purple” state—moving from one party to the other, sometimes electing a Republican governor, other times a Democratic one. Sometimes the legislative houses are controlled by the opposite party than the governor’s office, sometimes the two different parties control the two houses of the state legislature. Had Main Street been identified as a Republican initiative or a Democratic initiative, it is unlikely the program would have survived. Instead, in good economic years when there are ample funds in the state coffers, Main Street has often been



The whole region gathers for food, music and fun in Rutland, Vermont.

CREDIT: DOWNTOWN RUTLAND PARTNERSHIP

awarded extra funds. It has taken savvy leadership to navigate through political waters successfully year after year.

Yesterday, it was thrilling to be given the [Crowninshield Award](#), the highest honor in historic preservation. Most of all, it symbolized that through the Main Street initiative historic preservation has evolved from a focus on architectural correctness to a place-based process that is much more relevant to many more people. And, serendipitously, the interdependent web of Main Street organizations in some 1,600 towns and neighborhood districts is even more relevant for post-pandemic recovery. **FJ**

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MARY MEANS' long career has centered on helping communities create sustainable futures rooted in their heritage. She is the recipient of the American Planning Association's 2018 Planning Pioneer Award, and in 2020 the National Trust presented her with the Louise du Pont Crowninshield Award, the highest honor in historic preservation. This address was included as part of the 40th Anniversary of Main Street plenary.



### RESOURCE

An Invitation to Act: A Review of Main Street's Comeback



### TAKEAWAY

2020 Louise du Pont Crowninshield Award: Mary Means



### RESOURCE

Forty Years of Supporting Main Streets:  
Q&A with Main Street America's Patrice Frey