

Main Street: An Avenue of Culture and Commerce

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ABSTRACT

Influenced by theme parks and a desire to “revive” the past, we often nostalgically consider Main Street as a homogeneous entity, relegating its existence to the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries alone. Investigation into the history of Main Streets across the United States, as well as more specific analysis of Main Street in Memphis, TN reveals the fallacy of this assumption. Main Street has had a rich and complex history. Strengthening the presence of this true past, rather than relying solely on its fabricated history, offers a tremendous opportunity for cities to capitalize on their history. To build in a way that only references the earliest part of Main Street’s past not only belies the true history of the street, but also creates problems for the needs of its current users. Main Street has had a long and complicated history, making use of multiple building types suited to the ever-changing needs of its users. Contemporary interventions should then adapt to the present needs of those consuming what is for sale on Main Street. This project seeks to capitalize on the American Main Street’s historically commercial identity to provide the means of strengthening the presence of this important place in Memphis, Tennessee.

Over time, what has been for sale on Main Street has changed greatly. What started as an area for selling goods to the community is now a major destination for selling the experience of the city to both residents and visitors. The fact that the street always relied on a commercial culture makes its resurrection a viable and authentic avenue for development. The project proposed in this document makes use of a new hotel at the intersection of Main Street and Beale Street, currently a parking lot surrounded by several of Memphis’ important cultural icons, as the means of achieving this goal. Ultimately, paying homage to the site’s commercial identity provides an opportunity to represent an authentic memory of Main Street in Memphis – a place particular to its setting and yet recognizable within the greater context of American urban history.

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CHAPTER I

MAIN STREET AS CREATED MEMORY AND REALITY

In recent years, it has become clear that an interest in re-inhabiting our urban centers has become a major part of American culture. While we have chosen to re-inhabit many of the same spaces that previous urban dwellers occupied, we are doing so in very different ways. Post-industrial occupation of American cities places a great deal of emphasis on service-based consumerism and selling the experience of the city, rather than creating a booming metropolis of production and industry.¹ With this in mind, addressing the city's primary commercial corridor, Main Street, requires careful analysis and re-interpretation.

This project seeks to expose the complexity and intrigue that can be found along these avenues of commerce and culture, with particular emphasis on an investigation of Main Street in Memphis, Tennessee. Strengthening the presence of the true history of our Main Streets can provide an incredibly rich urban experience. The Walt Disney Company has been successful in capitalizing on the power of the idealized Main Street, as seen in Main Street, USA. The reality of Main Street, examined through the lens of urban theory such as J.B. Jackson's compelling idea of the Stranger's Path, can be just as marketable, and is better suited to implementation in an urban setting. As the reality of Main Street is a more accurate representation of the complex nature of our urban heritage, it offers the opportunity for cities to market their own unique qualities, rather than selling a generic experience based on a created collective memory.

¹ Herzog, 2

Challenging the Idea of a Homogenous Identity

Main Street, USA, holds an interesting place in American urban history, as it embodies both a reality, the product of centuries worth of development of consumer culture, and a created memory, constructed on nostalgic ideas about the past. In *The Death and Life of Main Street*, Miles Orvell explains that Main Street exists in the contemporary mind as a created memory, often producing nostalgia for a generic past that never truly existed.² The idealized Main Street, represented in Figure 1, presents a homogenous face, reflecting only one period of occupation.

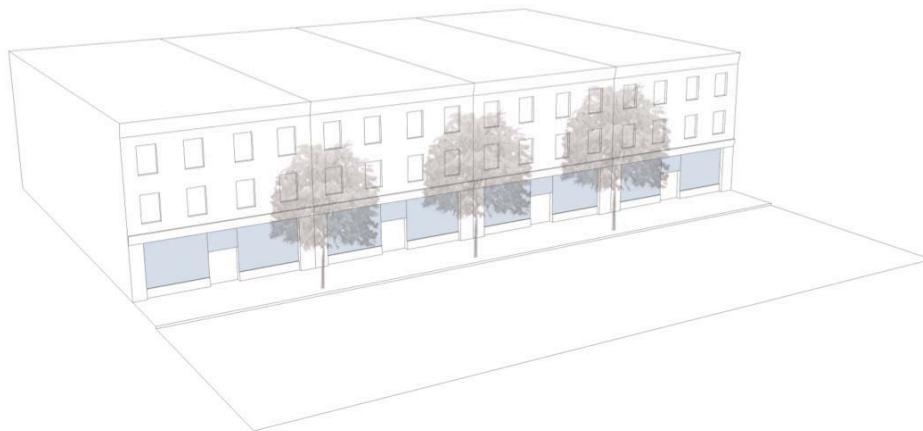


Figure 1. The Idealized Main Street.
(Diagram by Author)

Often the introduction of any building type that does not fit this uniform appearance is seen as alien, or belonging to another part of a city's fabric than the urban core, as seen in Figure 2. In *The Buildings of Main Street*, Richard Longstreth

² Orvell, 23

catalogues the many typologies that have occupied these commercial corridors throughout time. Longstreth notes that while many people often consider the car-driven building typologies of the mid-twentieth century as something that only affected the city's fringe, they often did infiltrate the city's core.

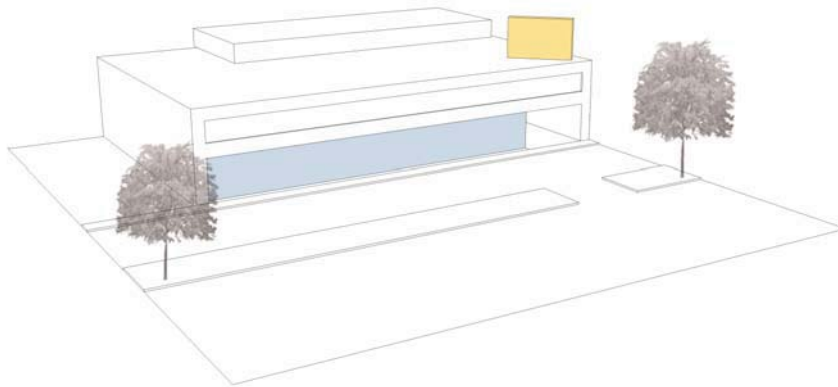


Figure 2. The Outlier.
(Diagram by Author)

A desire to “revive” Main Street’s created past has in some ways generated a new reality that must be considered. Ideas about Main Street USA draw such powerful associations that they have had a definite impact on the built environment. Orvell notes that even by the late 19th century Main Street was often deliberately created as a nostalgia-driven tourist destination.³ At first glance, this seems like a negative occurrence, but there is evidence to suggest some potentially positive outcomes from accepting this contemporary fabrication as part of Main Street’s evolution. As Orvell

³ Orvell, 22

notes, this created memory can lead to the production of “positive psychological functions, generating feelings of social connectedness.”⁴ These sentiments, capitalized upon by Disney’s Main Street, USA, and many actual municipalities, are noteworthy, and should not be ignored. Analysis of the reality of Main Street reveals that this nostalgia does have a place in our current understanding of the city, although it must be considered as one player rather than the sole dominant force.



Figure 3. The Reality of Main Street.
(Diagram by Author)

Real Main Streets do exist; some evidence the true progression of the street’s built environment in response to changes in commercial culture, while others have been altered to reflect the desire for this fabricated reality. Whichever case one considers, the evolution of this important avenue of commerce and culture, as

⁴ Orvell, 23

described in the following sections of this document provides, a great deal of information relevant to the revival of our urban centers. The reality of Main Street, depicted in Figure 3, embodies a combination of all of these ideas. It is just as much a perfect fabrication as it is a gritty reality. It is the tree-lined three-story commercial block, the aspiring tower, the car-driven horizontal plane, and even the vacant lot. While these many ideas and typologies may seem at odds with one another, one major factor holds them together. Each of these building typologies came about in order to meet the ever-changing needs of the urban consumer, whether resident or tourist. The following sections of this document further address this evolution of Main Street's commercial heritage, which the proposed design seeks to accommodate.

The Stranger's Path

With the aforementioned consideration of how a city can sell its own specific image along its primary commercial corridor in mind, we can return to an examination of how this image takes its shape, and who contributes to its definition. J.B. Jackson's writings on the city, published in *Landscape* in 1970, raise some important questions about who and what defines the cultural identity of a city. Jackson questions whether it is the permanent resident or the stranger who supports the city and defines its importance to the outside world.⁵ The author's belief that every community exists in part to satisfy visiting outsiders provides the basis for asking this important question, as well as his in-depth analysis of the "Stranger's Path," a description of the zone or avenue traversed by a transient individual visiting an unknown city.⁶ According to

⁵ Jackson, 94

⁶ *Ibid.*

Jackson, the Stranger's Path begins with the place of arrival, where one abandons the means of transportation used to reach the city and culminates in some sort of civic center, often the location of City Hall, all the while catering to "every pocketbook, every taste."⁷ A desire to satisfy the wants of the outsider distinguishes this path from all other parts of the city.⁸

Jackson's description of the "Stranger's Path," also helps situate the role of culture in Main Street's commercial heritage. He so firmly believes in the merits of the Stranger's Path that he considers it an absolutely essential place for the expression of the new aspirations and ideas shaping a community.⁹ This sentiment seems sensible, as such a complex area would express a wider swath of an area's culture than a more homogenous, controlled area might. At every level, Jackson's work helps to strengthen the notion that the natural evolution of such a commercial corridor creates a much more interesting opportunity for experiencing the city than the generic "revived" Main Street can offer.

Although Jackson describes several different zones with distinct qualities along the Path, he makes some statements that define the entity in its entirety. One such declaration notes that the Path lacks all signs of residential occupation, including grocery stores, furniture stores, and women and children's clothing stores.¹⁰ In addition, Jackson provides some recommendations for cultivating the positive attributes of the Path in a city, calling for the creation a civic center to embrace the stranger at the end of his or her journey and encourage gathering with the residents of

⁷ Jackson, 95-100

⁸ *Ibid.*, 97

⁹ *Ibid.*, 102

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 99

the place.¹¹ Addressing the success of Victor Gruen's shopping centers, Jackson warns, "the shopping center, no matter how big, how modern, how beautiful, is the *exact* opposite of the Path."¹² The following section of this document addresses how Main Street can embody and market qualities different than those found in a suburban shopping center, further solidifying its consideration in terms of the Stranger's Path.

The author closes his description of the Stranger's Path with an almost heroic tone, extolling its merits evidenced by its "small shops, bars, stalls, dance halls, movies...strange faces, strange costumes, strange and delightful impressions."¹³ The type of intrigue suggested as the basis for merit in this statement can be found in the typical Main Street. While the ideal Main Street can provide some sources of entertainment, the heterogeneous qualities of the true, somewhat gritty avenue of commerce and culture provides much more capital for consumption. Ultimately, this project seeks to capitalize on these qualities of intrigue and discovery in the proposed hotel design.

Why Main Street Matters

Insight into the power of Main Street in contributing to a community's cultural and economic base can be discovered through a brief investigation of the National Trust's Main Street Program. Within twenty-five years of its founding, this program, established as an experiment in a few Midwest communities in 1977, reached over 1400 communities in forty-three states.¹⁴ Extolling the merits of this program, Richard

¹¹ Jackson, 103

¹² *Ibid.*, 105

¹³ *Ibid.*, 106

¹⁴ Longstreth, 1

Longstreth notes that it often leads to an increased appreciation of an area's past, economic stimulus, and new sources of social interaction.¹⁵ Longstreth's rhetoric helps to further the notion that the intervention into Memphis's Main Street called for in this document will provide an opportunity to achieve these goals through an understanding of its historic commercial heritage.

Miles Orvell's work provides a synopsis of the guidelines driving the National Trust's Main Street Program, helping to further understand how this commercial corridor can be put into action as an integral part of a city's economic and cultural base. Orvell's description of the model proposed by this program begins by noting that Main Street is extremely susceptible to changes in consumer trends, as they contributed to its formation, demise, and resurrection.¹⁶ One point of this model addresses the idea of selling an image, stating that the ability of towns or cities to market their image makes them much more competitive with suburban shopping centers.¹⁷ Summarizing what we can gain from an understanding of Main Street's history as an avenue of commerce and culture, Richard Longstreth notes that a study of this area not only provides information about the past, but also can serve as a lesson for future endeavors in business, development, and architecture.¹⁸

Selling the City

As stated above, a reliance on Main Street's commercial heritage has played an important role in the survival of Main Streets across the country. Miles Orvell

¹⁵ Longstreth, 1

¹⁶ Orvell, 69

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Longstreth, 131

describes how several endangered commercial centers have survived by capitalizing on their ability to market a “unique character” as well as meeting the basic needs of the surround community.¹⁹ Orvell describes the successful preservation of such Main Street shopping districts as the antithesis of urban renewal projects and the “modernization” strategies of the 1930s and 1940s.²⁰

The selling of an image, whether of a bustling hub in the center of a quaint historic town or of an almost unsettling and tantalizing Stranger’s Path in an unfamiliar place has been essential to the history of Main Streets for decades. Orvell describes the identity of Main Street as “enduring and powerful,” an essential factor in the renewal of both small towns and larger cities.²¹ Whether entirely authentic or slightly mythologized to attract the attention and spending power of visiting strangers, Main Street’s commercial identity has fostered its transformation in order to suit the needs of the goods or services for sale on this avenue of commerce.

Marketing an urban center through its Main Street can also produce several practical benefits. Creating a hub that will attract people from outside of the community can have a great impact on an area’s economic standing, as well as the local job market. Evidence of this trend can be found in the fact that in 2011 tourism in America directly generated \$124 billion in tax revenue for local, state and federal governments.²² This point becomes particularly poignant, and relevant to a city’s residents, when one considers that the average household would pay \$1,055 more in

¹⁹ Orvell, 61

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 61

²¹ *Ibid.*, 70

²² *U.S. Travel*

taxes annually without tax revenue generated from the travel and tourism industry.²³

In terms of jobs, travel and tourism supported 14.4 million jobs in the United States alone during the year 2011.²⁴

Further evidence of the shift from a product-driven economy to one more reliant on services and entertainment provides additional impetus for consideration of engaging in the trend of selling the city itself in the urban core. While past practices on Main Street may have dealt with the production or sale of goods and necessities, now one out of every nine U.S. non-farm jobs is created directly or indirectly or is induced by travel and tourism.²⁵ Finally, as addressed in other sections of this document, studies completed by the United States Travel Association have proven that the benefits of tourism to community can include community pride, tolerance, and a stronger sense of identity.²⁶

²³ *U.S. Travel*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Main Street's Commercial Heritage

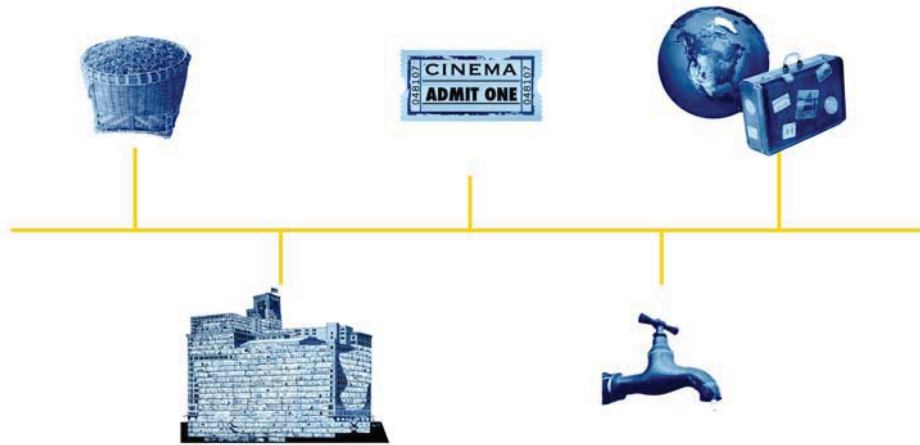


Figure 4. Main Street's Commercial Heritage.
(Diagram by Author)

In *Main Street to Miracle Mile*, Chester Liebs investigates the history of the American Main Street, which he describes as the “corridor of business activity in the heart of most towns and cities – a corridor known literally or generically as Main Street.”²⁷ By the middle of the eighteenth century a primary commercial corridor existed in most American colonial port cities.²⁸ The inland movement of settlers in the early nineteenth century brought about hundreds of new Main Streets, often occupying portions of the turnpikes created to connect newly founded communities.²⁹ Following the introduction of the railroad and subsequent increases in commercial activity, a new building typology developed for these commercial zones, often resulting in three or

²⁷ Liebs, 7

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

four story blocks of masonry buildings.³⁰ Interestingly, this early typology often did not even survive into the twentieth-century, as a new method of building came about with each change in consumer culture.

Throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, dramatic increases in urban populations and growing urban transit systems increased retail trade along these Main Street thoroughfares, driving up the cost of land and therefore increasing building heights and density.³¹ Despite variations in size, scale, and density based on location, most early twentieth-century Main Streets shared several common social characteristics, although they may have varied in respect to built forms. As Liebs notes, "...they had become the hardest working thoroughfares in town...They also served as the civic and religious hubs for the communities around them."³²

By the end of the nineteenth century, changes in shopping habits already began to threaten Main Street's prominent place in American culture. In *The Death and Life of Main Street*, Orvell notes that the large network of railroad systems in place across the country allowed consumers to make increased use of the mail-order retail industry.³³ Orvell identifies this as the beginning of the trend that would eventually cause even more harm to Main Street, the arrival of the chain store.³⁴

Even more influential in shaping the appearance of Main Streets across the country was the increased presence of the automobile. In 1937, Lewis Mumford praised improvements in transportation technology for their role in increasing "the

³⁰ Liebs, 7-8

³¹ *Ibid.*, 8

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Orvell, 49

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 51

potential area of urban settlement,” perhaps while unaware of the role it would ultimately play in challenging the survival of the city’s urban fabric.³⁵ Longstreth’s work provides further insight into the extent to which car-driven development infiltrated the city, noting that even motels became an integral part of the city’s center.³⁶

What Makes Main Street Different than a Mall

In an attempt to follow up on his success in establishing new commercial districts through regional mall designs located in the suburbs, architect Victor Gruen proposed the construction of urban malls, complete with carefully designed streetscapes, lighting, street furniture, and signage as the solution to the derelict state of many city’s commercial cores.³⁷ The most extensive of these plans, intended for construction in Fort Worth, Texas even received praise from Jane Jacobs for their ability to create “a rich downtown experience,” in contrast to many other urban renewal projects that she felt would “banish the street.”³⁸

Despite this potential for merit, Gruen’s urban mall plans were generally unsuccessful as they ignored the unpredictable and random nature of life, similar to what Jackson describes in his *Stranger’s Path*.³⁹ Ultimately, although only dealing with one block, this project seeks to reflect this highly complex nature of Main Street. Just as Main Street should not be relegated to the only period of its existence, it should not be limited in its ability to take on new expressions in the future.

³⁵ Mumford “What”, 95

³⁶ Longstreth, 130

³⁷ Orvell, 53

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 53-54

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 55

Considering Context

A major part of this project centers on creating a design that will pay homage to the context of the typical Main Street, as well as the specific site on Main Street in Memphis. Context as used in this project seeks to avoid what Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown describe as “*Perverse*”, or reliant solely on the desire to imitate past building traditions.⁴⁰ Richard Longstreth makes an important observation on this topic in *The Buildings of Main Street*, noting that in many cases designs that attempt to revive Main Street can turn truly historic places into theme parks that belie their true history.⁴¹ As previously addressed in this document, true Main Streets, in contrast to imagined or idealized ones, often lack one context to which a design might even respond in this way.

The proposed design instead relies on theory such as Venturi and Scott Brown’s notion that “*Complexity engages a range of contexts: cultural, aesthetic, sociological, urbanistic, rather than just the formal or ideological.*”⁴² In particular, the project relies on the authentic context of a culture reliant on commerce present in this section of Main Street for over a century. Choosing to design based on this particular understanding of context allows for the proposed project to focus on experiential qualities rather than aesthetics alone.

In *The Culture of Cities*, Lewis Mumford explains how architecture can respond to context in this manner, as he describes it as a device to focus a variety of “social facts...the process of social organization and association, and the beliefs and world-

⁴⁰ Scott Brown and Venturi, 9

⁴¹ Longstreth, 37

⁴² Scott Brown and Venturi, 10

outlooks of a whole society.”⁴³ In “What is a City?” Mumford further develops this idea, charging architects and urban planners with the task of embodying and dramatizing the “new possibilities in city life” through built forms.⁴⁴ Building on this notion, the proposed design seeks to energize this currently downtrodden area of the city through capitalizing on its potential to focus such activity.

Community Space vs. Public Space

As this project investigates the major commercial corridor of the American city, it must also address the growing trend toward creating privately-owned, consumer driven spaces with public qualities⁴⁵ Michael Brill addresses this topic in “Problems With Mistaking Community Life for Public Life,” noting that public space typically places us in contact with strangers, while community life typically involves interactions with “neighbors, nodding acquaintances, shopkeepers, locally resident police, fire, mail and town officials, and people in local fraternal, sporting and religious groups.”⁴⁶ Sharon Zukin’s discussion of the newly developed role of the private sector in shaping and controlling public space, in “Whose Culture? Whose City?,” adds another layer to this already complicated discussion. Zukin states that fear of actual public space often drives the design of spaces, like those found in Disney World and malls, that are only “public” on the surface because they are used by large groups of people for one common purpose.⁴⁷ On the opposite end of the spectrum, Zukin notes that twenty or thirty years ago shopping centers began to incorporate hotels and post offices, as well

⁴³ Mumford *Culture*, 403

⁴⁴ Mumford “What”, 96

⁴⁵ Herzog, 1

⁴⁶ Brill, 50

⁴⁷ Zukin, 140

as schools in some cases, suggesting that some public enterprises can actually exist on private property.⁴⁸ The proposed project seeks to capitalize on this tradition in some ways, as some programmatic elements, such as the large atrium used for concert series, would be open to the general public, while still operating under private ownership.

An interesting addition to this discussion can be found in Mario Gandelsonas' *X-Urbanism*, where the author argues that Main Street has traditionally served as the dominant public space in America.⁴⁹ This standpoint suggests that privately owned consumer spaces can have public qualities, while still not being truly public. In *The Death and Life of Main Street*, Miles Orvell describes Disneyland and its nostalgic Main Street as the type of "public" space often preferred by consumers because it is placed firmly under the control of private ownership.⁵⁰

The reality of Main Street occupies a peculiar place in this debate. Despite its history as a largely privatized, commercial thoroughfare, scholars sometimes still place it within the realm of public space.⁵¹ Brill's definition of community space as "a mix of both semi-public and semi-private places, like the neighborhood bar, the often walked public street, the school PTA meeting and the church dinner," paired with Liebs' classification of Main Streets as "hubs for the communities around them" places the type of space they create more solidly within the realm of "Community Space" than "Public Space."⁵² Brill also notes that recent trends toward designing community space

⁴⁸ Zukin, 142

⁴⁹ Gandelsonas, 45

⁵⁰ Orvell, 39

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁵² Brill, 50; Liebs, 8

are not isolated incidents in American history, stating “In truth, we’ve never had much Public life in the U.S: We’ve not had the population density (England and Italy are ten times as dense) nor popular desire, nor the physical forms nor the socio-economic structure to support it.”⁵³

Precedents: Embracing Complexity and Selling the City

Allied Works’ School of Architecture for Clemson University



Figure 5. Allied Works’ proposed design, taking cues from surrounding massing strategies
(Image Source, Bowers)

A contemporary project that deals with some of the issues examined in this document can be found in Allied Works’ proposed School of Architecture for Clemson University on Meeting Street in Charleston, South Carolina. Currently, the school

⁵³ Brill, 52

occupies a nondescript single-story structure located on the corner of the site, at the intersection of George Street. This structure breaks the rhythm of the streetscape due to its relative flatness when compared to its flanking structures of two-and-a-half and four stories. Previous proposals for this project completed by other firms have been met with fierce opposition due to insensitivity to the site's historic context.⁵⁴

The proposed design (Figure 5) draws from the scale and massing of the surrounding structures and remains sensitive to its historic context, yet provides an unmistakably new and dynamic addition to Charleston's built environment and the Meeting Street streetscape. Although inspired by traditional massing forms taken from residential architecture, the building engages with the street in a manner much better suited to its function. While still holding the edges of the corner, the building's ground story retreats to create a generous entry and draw its users into the site. The amount of transparency on its outer elevations creates further play between activity on the street and the building's interior.

The building's outdoor terraces create an additional level of interaction between the structure and the street, and make yet another clever reference to the spirit of the surrounding context. Drawing inspiration from Charleston's single houses, the massing is broken into three parts, interwoven by sweeping walls creating pockets of light reminiscent of the city's iconic porches.⁵⁵ In addition, many of the walls feature patterns created through voids drawn from the many garden walls found within the neighboring context.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Cloepfil

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

This case study provides additional intrigue when one begins to look in to the public reaction to its design. Just as earlier proposals faced a good bit of criticism, Allied Works' project has been highly contested. Opponents feel that the design does not suit its neighboring historic context.⁵⁷ Some have gone as far as to produce unsolicited alternative designs, shown here in Figure 6. The proposed "solution" makes much more literal references to Charleston's historic buildings and does little to alter the way that the building interacts with the street. To construct such a building, especially considering the intended program, would suggest that a discussion about architecture in Charleston can have only one meaning, limited to one early part of the city's history. Allied Works' design will allow for the city to market its architectural significance as something that has continued to evolve into the twentieth-century, rather than creating an idealized city, frozen in time.



Figure 6. Traditional design suggested to replace Allied Works' project
(Image Source, Bowers)

⁵⁷ Bowers

Aloft Hotel, Asheville, North Carolina

Although it may not represent a major architectural achievement recognized in international publications, the Aloft Hotel in Asheville, North Carolina serves as a useful example for understanding how a hotel's design might change based on its location along a city's major commercial corridor. Located along Asheville's Main Street, Biltmore Avenue, this hotel, depicted in Figure 7, evidences interesting efforts intended to increase its users' interaction with the city, and more specifically, with the street. By placing the hotel's restaurant on its most prominent corner, this space begins to become part of the activity generated by the surrounding commercial enterprises. In addition, this design includes an outdoor terrace bar, providing a dialogue between the bar's users and people on this street. While not major moves, these choices support the idea that the spaces within this building can be used to help market the surrounding area and the experience of Asheville itself.



Figure 7. Rendering of Aloft Hotel, Asheville, NC
(Image Source, "Aloft Hotel")

The Aloft also deals with another important consideration when building in a city's core, which involves accommodating multiple means of transportation. A major part of the project includes a city-owned public parking garage, incorporated into the privately owned hotel's structure. The entrance to this garage allows for easy access by patrons arriving to the site by car. In addition, this parking garage supports the use of surrounding businesses on the street. Perhaps most importantly, the attention given to this feature acknowledges that the car has a place on this commercial corridor, as it is essential to its survival as a viable entity. The building makes does not attempt to stand out from its surrounding in an obtrusive manner, but has been adapted in certain ways to reflect the needs of its contemporary users.

CHAPTER II MAIN STREET, MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

Main Street's Many Contexts

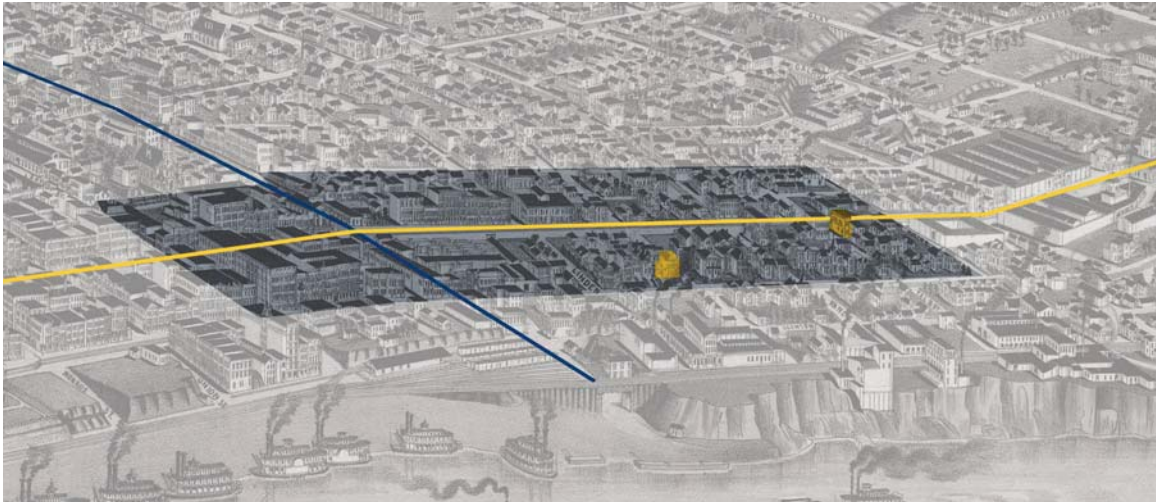


Figure 8. Bird's Eye View, 1887, showing a mix of residential and commercial scale buildings. The two remaining structures from this period in the area of study are highlighted in yellow. (Image underlay source, The Library of Congress American Memory Collection)

In *Main Street to Miracle Mile*, Chester Liebs notes that Main Street in Memphis developed concurrently with the rise in “river cities” located along the Mississippi River, such as St. Louis and Natchez, in the early nineteenth century.⁵⁸ Early maps show a street comprised of some commercial buildings mixed in with moderately sized freestanding residences (Figure 8). By the first decade of the twentieth century, however, the area had begun to more heavily evidence a commercial presence. Throughout the early 1900s, constant commercial activity, paired with its connection to both Central and Union Station made Main Street a hub for rooming houses and

⁵⁸ Liebs, 7

hotels.⁵⁹ Interestingly, hotel space occupied several of the oldest structures remaining in this area of Main Street, making its presence perhaps even more important today as one of the most visible remnants of the area's past.

The 1924 Comprehensive City Plan for Memphis identifies Main Street as “the most important business street in Memphis.”⁶⁰ At this time, its width, just over eight-two feet, was considered its greatest problem, as it caused traffic congestion. However, its state of development even by the 1920s made its widening seem unpractical.⁶¹ This acknowledgment of Main Street's congestion even at this early time in its development helps to understand the need for consideration of its constant evolution when considering the context of Main Street. Evidence also exists to suggest Memphis' use of Main Street as a major asset for marketing the city, at a relatively early date. A publication created in 1940 to encourage tourism and city development (Figure 9) paired images of the commercial establishments and street scenes along Main Street with the caption “The Mecca of Shoppers from Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee.”⁶² Although the types of built forms may found on the street have changed greatly over time, this type of evidence shows the longevity of its context in terms of the links between commerce, culture, and tourism.

⁵⁹ Finger

⁶⁰ Bartholomew, 50

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 50

⁶² Bridges, 76

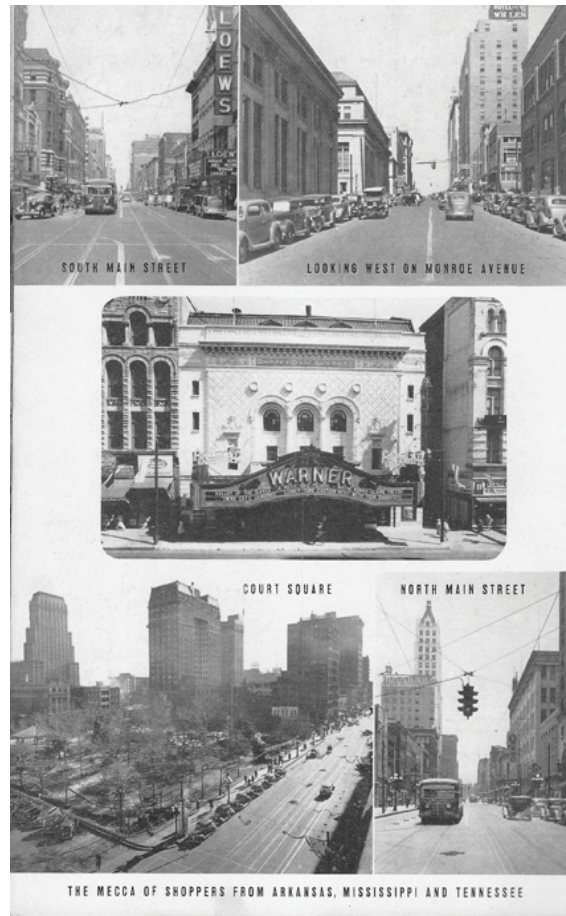


Figure 9. "The Mecca of Shoppers from Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee"
(Image Source, Bridges, 76)

The area of Main Street given the greatest amount of consideration in this project runs from the Gayoso Avenue to Huling Avenue. This area proved to be particularly interesting for analysis, as it serves as the link between the Central Business District, and the South Main Arts District. Investigation its history reveals telling information about the constant changes occurring in relation to Main Street's built environment. Analysis of a 1907 map of the area (Figure 10) reveals that very few structures survive from this early period. The building typologies associated with this period fall within the realm of ideas about the traditional Main Street, the type many "restoration" efforts and theme parks attempt to recreate. One such building, located

at the corner of Main and Linden (Figure 11), began life as an ice cream factory and shop, was converted into a hotel and expanded less than ten years after construction, and now serves as condominiums available for lease or purchase.



Figure 10. Diagram showing extant structures located along Main Street present in 1907
(Image underlay source, Sanborn Fire Insurance Company Map, 1907)



Figure 11. Hoadley's Ice Cream – Later the Adler Hotel – Now the Adler Condominiums
(Photograph by Author)

Review of later maps reveals even more noteworthy information about the trajectory of different building types along Main Street, as well as the types of goods and services being sold along this commercial corridor. Although a staggering number of buildings present on the 1951 Sanborn Map of Memphis (Figure 12) no longer survive, a much greater number remain extant than those found when examining the 1907 map. Many of the new buildings constructed between 1907 and 1951 evidence the increasing presence of the automobile in the city, such as “Hemphill’s Diesel School.” This building, still extant, has recently undergone renovation and serves as retail space available for lease.



Figure 12. Diagram showing extant structures located along Main Street present in 1951
(Image underlay source, Sanborn Fire Insurance Company Map, 1951)

As stated above, the area given the most in-depth analysis in this project was chosen due to its ability to provide a strong link between several of the city’s greatest cultural and economic assets. At present, this area reads as a series of edges, where

several important cultural assets, landmarks, and nodes of activity disintegrate, rather than converge (Figure 13). In addition, this area includes the intersection Beale Street, referred to as the city's "African-American" Main Street.⁶³ Beale Street's rebirth as a popular tourist destination and a major contributor to the city's nightlife plays an important role in its consideration within the development proposed in this project.



Figure 13. Diagram showing existing landmarks, paths, and nodes, with edges severing area of study (Diagram by Author)

⁶³ Scott Brown, 84

Present Conditions

Main Street, Memphis as Jackson's Stranger's Path

When addressing how we might embrace the inevitable presence of the Stranger's Path in our cities, J. B. Jackson describes a scene very similar to that seen in the section of Memphis' Main Street straddling the core of the Central Business District and the South Main Arts District. Following the same model as the path described by Jackson, Main Street in Memphis begins with the place of arrival, where a stranger would disembark from the train and begin travel by foot or other means, and ends in the civic center defined by City Hall (Figure 14). Along this path, Main Street features a number of intriguing pockets of activity, each with their own unique character. In addition, as Memphis' Stranger's Path, the street also includes a number of empty pockets and less polished developments.

Addressing the holes in the city's urban fabric that one might encounter along the Stranger's Path, Jackson writes, "No one, I suppose, would wish to see the Stranger's Path remain as it is: garish and dirty and decaying . . . cheated of a final merger with the broader life of the city."⁶⁴ The derelict space surrounding the remaining urban fabric in this area effectively severs this portion of the street from the remainder of the city, creating a barrier between the South Main Arts District and the remainder of the city as well. This project seeks to intervene with Main Street in a manner that allows for the survival of the unique and intriguing elements of the Stranger's Path, while attempting to eradicate its potentially negative qualities. Ultimately, the proposed development and its intended results attempt to allow for the

⁶⁴ Jackson, 105

continued understanding of this area as something unique, with pockets of different types of development spurring interest along its path, rather than one homogenous entity.

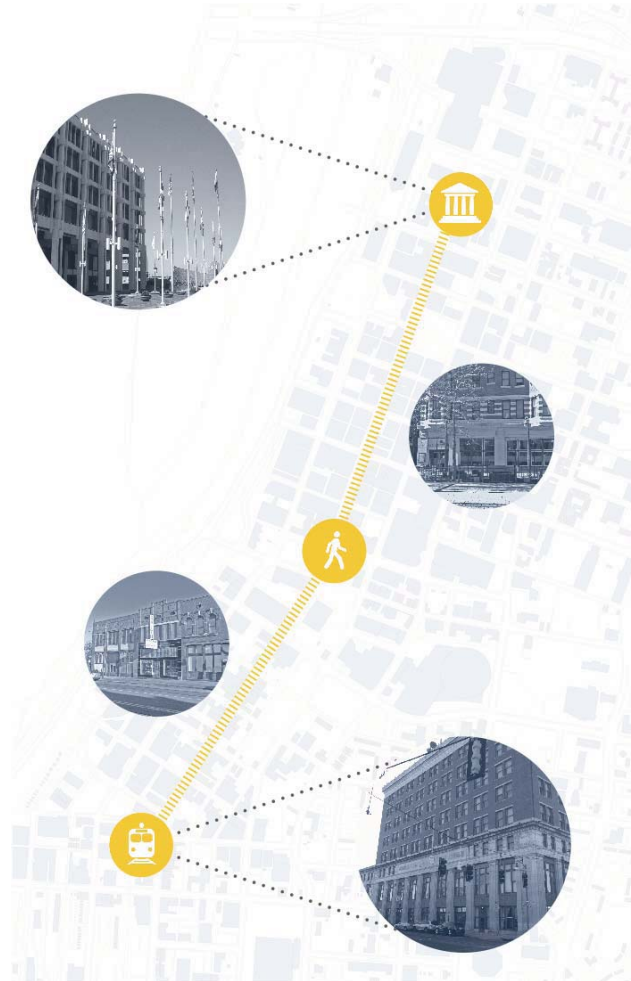


Figure 14. Main Street as Memphis' Stranger's Path
(Diagram by Author)

Eyesores and Promising Opportunities

The areas along Main Street that might be considered part of the problems associated with the Stranger's Path have received attention recently, both in writing and in action. In 2009, the Memphis Flyer ran a cover feature on eleven of the city's

biggest “eyesores,” defined as “sites or buildings that stood out from their surroundings — properties that, if improved or even removed — would surely make a difference to their neighbors.”⁶⁵ Two of these buildings, the now vacant Ambassador and Chisca Hotels, are located within immediate context of the site investigated in this document. If one moves past the negative associations with the terminology used, the message provided by this article shows the importance of the site investigated in this document to the image of Main Street and downtown Memphis. Before addressing the individual examples, the author makes the more positive statement, “Boy, these places are ugly, but somebody, somewhere, may be able to make them useful, profitable, and even beautiful again.”⁶⁶

One of the buildings addressed in this article, the Chisca Hotel, has since been purchased and is in the process of being renovated and restored (Figure 15). By November 2014, the building will reopen as a mixed-use facility featuring apartments on the upper floors and retail space at the ground level.⁶⁷ Interestingly, the project will include an outdoor performance space on Main Street, creating the type of privately owned semi-public space discussed in earlier portions of this document. Of equal note is the fact that the hotel’s 1961 addition, a definite outlier to traditional conceptions of Main Street’s idealized appearance, will be kept and renovated as part of the project.⁶⁸ This exciting decision to keep the later addition will allow for a reading of Main Street as something that has developed over time, and evidence

⁶⁵ Finger

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Ashby

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

twentieth-century thinking about how buildings needed to adapt to suit the needs of consumers.



Figure 15. Rendering of proposed design for the Chisca Hotel
(Image Source http://dsginc.net/ourinitiatives_1)

Past Efforts

The Mid-America Mall

A greater understanding of how Main Street should be dealt with can be gained from analysis of previous attempts made to revitalize the street. Once such example, the conversion of a large portion of the street into a pedestrian mall, provides a good bit of information regarding some potential pitfalls of overly controlled development. Completed in 1976, this conversion of twelve blocks of Main Street into a pedestrian mall made use of several forms of street sculpture and landscape elements to provide

a link between the City Hall Civic Center area and the commercial district (Figure 16).⁶⁹

Intended to increase commercial activity, the pedestrian-only scheme proved to be unsuccessful. By 1986 the mall had fallen into disrepair and required further intervention. A new version of the mall, featuring a more traditional streetscape and re-introduction of trolley lines opened in 1991.⁷⁰



Figure 16. Plan of the Mid-America Mall
(Image Source, Rubenstein, 194)

This example demonstrates how a commercial area must accommodate more than one type of user or mode of transportation in order to be successful. In addition, it shows how highly controlled, somewhat homogenous design can be detrimental to the use and understanding of a major commercial corridor. Recalling the previous discussion of the failures of Victor Gruen's carefully crafted urban malls, one begins to see some of the rationale behind the failure of the Mid-America Mall. Aside from limiting access to only one means of transportation, the design created a sense of homogeneity that limited the expression of Main Street's complex past.

⁶⁹ Rubenstein, 194

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Peabody Place and Beale Street

In 1984, Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown created a plan for Beale Street and the area known as “Peabody Place” as part of their City Center Development Plan.⁷¹ The project sought to provide strategies for new construction, as well as preservation and rehabilitation in the Beale Street and Main Street areas. Interestingly, this plan sought to first meet the needs of the city’s residents and create a cultural center.⁷² With a well-established cultural and commercial center, the planners felt that officials could then market the best version of the city to visitors.



Figure 17. Section through Beale Street as proposed by Venturi, Rauch, and Scott Brown
(Image Source, Scott Brown, 51)

The complex nature of the Beale Street and Main Street junction drew specific attention, due to its complicated history and diverse architectural typologies.⁷³ In addition, the plan sought to capitalize on the potential cultural benefits of celebrating the intersection of Memphis’ African-American and white Main Streets. A large part of the plan focused on signage, furthering the notion that one of Main Street’s primary functions in our current time is selling the city. The building proposed for the specific

⁷¹ Scott Brown, 78

⁷² *Ibid.*, 82

⁷³ *Ibid.*

site investigated in this project rose to a similar height, in line with the now built Peabody Office Tower, and featured a similar setback to receive pedestrian traffic from the surrounding area. In addition, although the plan proposed a series of connections between existing buildings, and some sense of master planning, it still showed some vacant blocks and evidence of the site's imperfections.

Desired Results



Figure 18. Desired result of design, showing cultural and economic drivers converging on site
(Diagram by Author)

Although the proposed design, discussed in greater detail in the following chapter of this document, deals with only one block along Main Street in Memphis, it is intended to spur future development and strengthen the presence of Main Street as a

whole within the city of Memphis. Like Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown's plan, the plan of desired future development allows for a reading of the site's complexities, rather than proposing a homogenous strategy of infill buildings. The major goals of the plan shown are to encourage interaction between the surrounding cultural and economic centers, and replace the reading of the intersection of Main and Beale Streets as an edge with a new node of activity.



Figure 19. Diagram of proposed landmarks, paths, and nodes, removing edges severing area of study
(Diagram by Author)

CHAPTER III PROPOSED DESIGN

This project seeks to provide an architectural solution to the aforementioned problems preventing the continued expression of Main Street's commercial identity in the portion of this street linking Memphis' Downtown Core and the South Main Arts District. In order to achieve this goal, the program of a hotel is used to investigate how we ought to consider building on Main Street in our current time. The resultant project manipulates the typical hotel program in a manner that fosters more interaction between the building's users and activity on the street. In addition, the proposed hotel places much more emphasis on semi-public gathering spaces at a variety of scales, and calls for a high degree of porosity to increase visibility of the surrounding context.

Why a Hotel?

Two out of five of the leading attractions visited by tourists in Memphis are located within walking distance of the site investigated in this project, and yet it remains vacant.⁷⁴ Neighboring hotels, shown in Figure 20 do take advantage of tourist activity downtown. However, these hotels are largely concentrated in the Central Business District Core and do not encourage interaction with the increasingly popular South Main Arts District. Historically, the area of study featured many hotels, due to its connection to the Central Station. Many of the few remaining structures from the area's early history reflect this heritage, although they have been put into other use or sit vacant.

⁷⁴ Memphis Fact Sheet

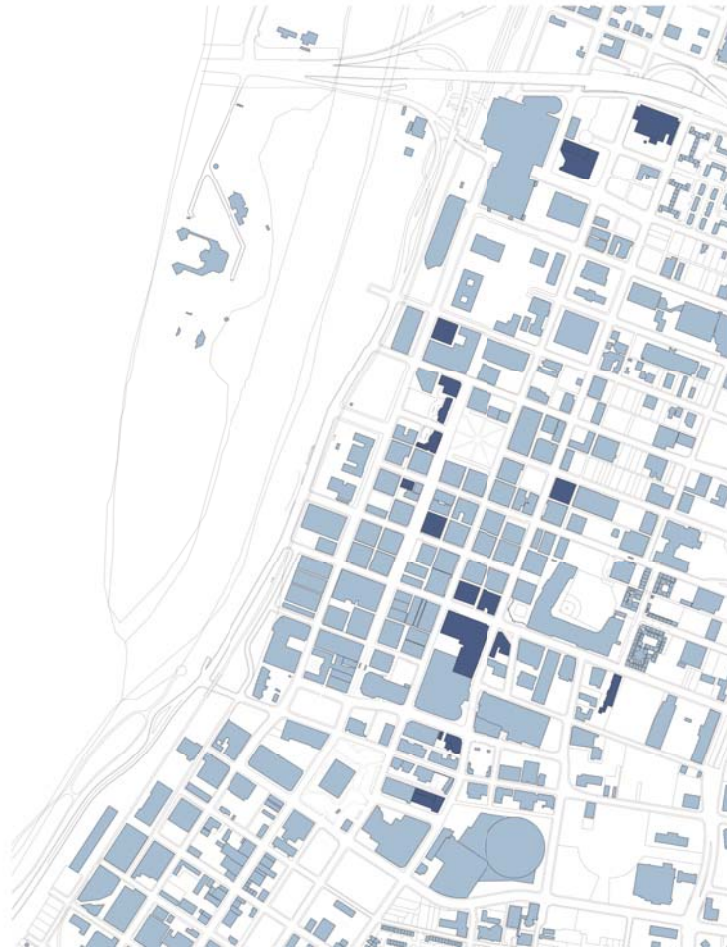


Figure 20. Existing Downtown Hotels.
(Diagram by Author)

In *The Death and Life of Main Street*, Miles Orvell describes how a unique mixture of “restaurants and specialty shops” can serve as the key element in a commercial district’s survival, reliant on attracting people from a wide swath surrounding the city.⁷⁵ With this statement in mind, the hotel’s primary restaurant and bar are placed in prominent areas within the building’s ground floor. Highlighting these elements of the program begins to make them more visible and attractive to

⁷⁵ Orvell, 61

people on the street that are not hotel guests, encouraging them to engage with the site in ways that they may not have otherwise done. The placement of the restaurant, with its outdoor seating area fronting Main Street, also allows for a dialogue between patrons visiting the restaurant and activity occurring on the street.

Massing Strategies

In addition to creating more exposure for the semi-public components of the hotel's program, the building's massing, seen in Figure 21, reacts to ideas about Main Street in general, as well as qualities specific to its location in Memphis. Conceptually, the massing begins with a conventional block structure, wrapping a double-loaded corridor around the entire block, creating a small courtyard within. From this point, the portion of the building facing Main Street is removed, in order to make the courtyard space part of the building's public face, rather than an insular element. This removal of mass also allows for the allotment of space to receive visitors arriving to the site by all forms of transportation, including automobiles, trolleys, and foot traffic. The south leg of the building, which houses the restaurant at the ground level, retreats an additional thirty feet in order to create room for an outdoor eating area, while still allowing a generous space for a newly-positioned trolley stop.

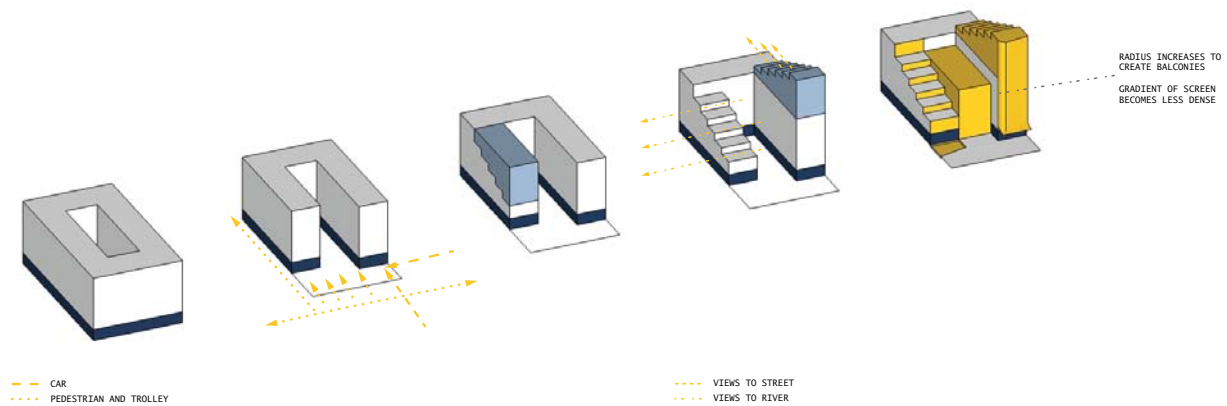


Figure 21. Massing Strategies
(Diagram by Author)

While the first strategies addressed above could apply to a myriad of urban situations, the next moves made begin to deal with conditions specific to Main Street in Memphis. Removing a large portion of the building's mass from the south (Beale Street) leg helps to create new experiences for its users, as well as to reference conditions regarding the massing of the surrounding context. The portion of the building facing the Central Business District becomes the recipient of this relocated mass, allowing for a bridging of the two scales converging on this site, with the south leg referencing the smaller scale of the South Main Arts District. In addition, this shift creates the opportunity for rooms located on the building's north leg to have unobstructed views down Main Street, as well as to the Mississippi River as the building rises to a height equal to the largest surrounding structures. This shifting of mass also creates communal terraces at the ends of the building's upper floors, intended to encourage users to engage with activity on the street below. Ultimately, these moves help a great deal in achieving the goal of acknowledging the idea that Main Street's primary commodity for sale is now the experience of the city itself.

Shifting Program

While it is not uncommon for hotels to feature a mixed-use program, many of the most lively activities and grandest spaces of the hotel are often relegated to the more private areas of the building. This places events, such as concert series open to the public, high above the street level, unknown to the passerby. Creating terraces at lower levels creates an opportunity to allow for dialogue between the building's users and pedestrians on the street below.



Figure 22. Interaction Based on Shifting Hotel Program
(Diagram by Author)

Taking this idea even further, a grand gesture, such as a large semi-public space allows for the building to act as a host for events drawing visitors into the site who are not staying in the hotel. Considering Main Street an embodiment of J.B. Jackson's Stranger's Path, the creation of such a hub along the path seems an appropriate action. Although buildings along Main Street have engaged in this shifting of program, the result has not always been desirable. Placing elements such as pools on the

ground floor creates an awkward divide between the public and private realms, necessitating the use of barriers, as seen in Figure 23, showing the annex to the Hotel Chisca on Memphis' Main Street.

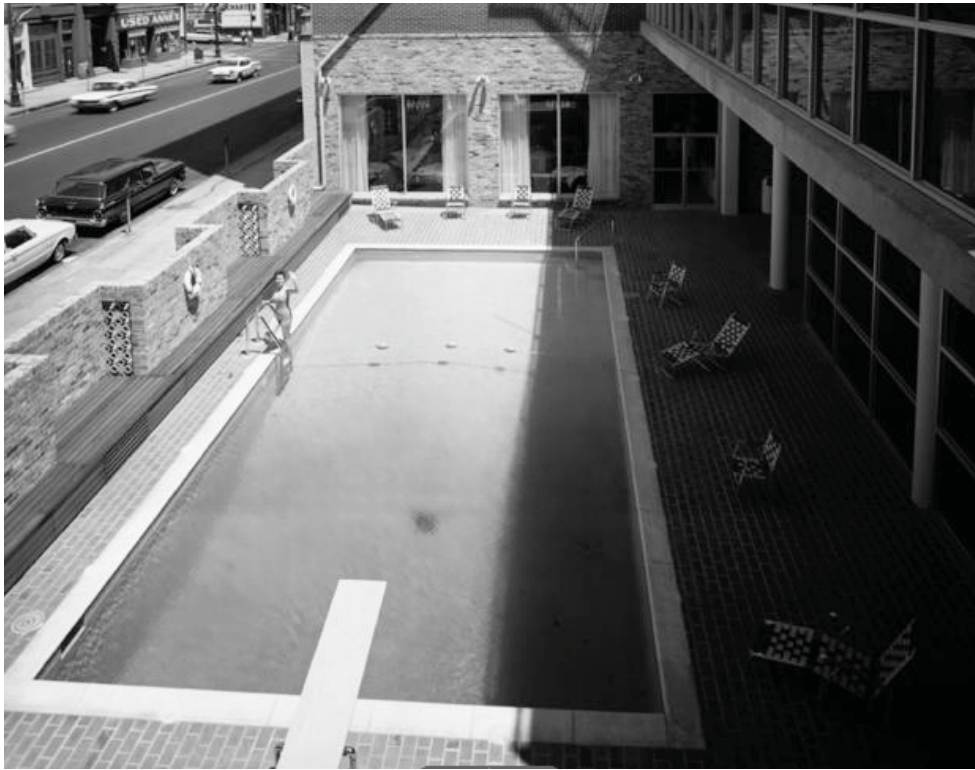


Figure 23. Pool fronting Main Street at the Hotel Chisca, ca. 1963
(Image Source <http://www.newmansmemphis.org>)

Experiencing the Design

With the massing strategies and shifting of program discussed above, the proposed hotel seeks to create a new experience of Main Street for visitors and locals alike. Many of the design decisions made in order to facilitate this experience occur at the ground level, depicted in Figures 24 and 25. Hotel guests arriving by car would enter the north side of the site through a paved driveway at the same level as the plaza



Figure 24. Ground Floor Axonometric

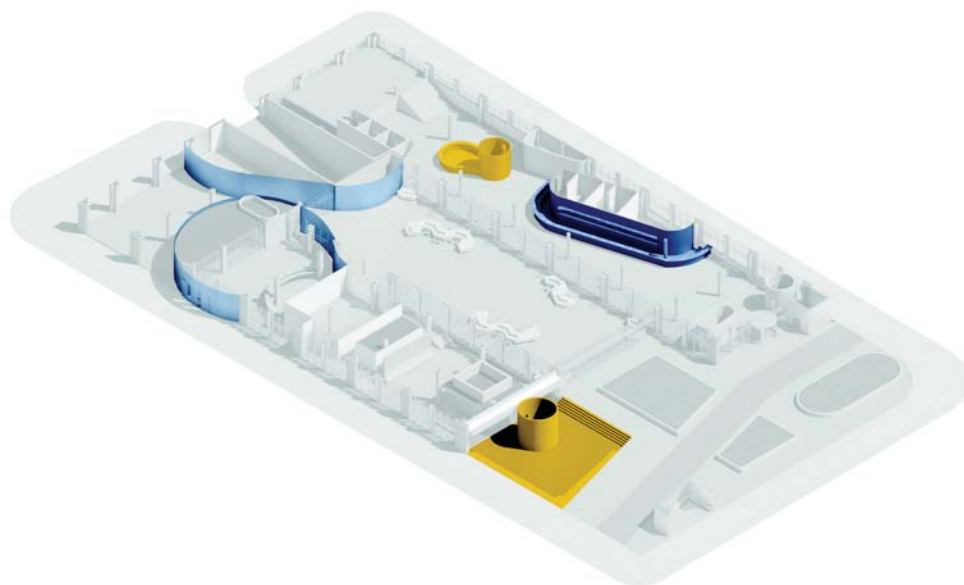


Figure 25. Ground Floor Circulation Devices

created at the building's front. An overhanging porte-cochere, extending from the perforated metal screen wrapping the mass added to the building's north leg helps to define this entry. While the design seeks to accommodate the need for automobiles, it does not place primary emphasis on their use, as from this point, cars would proceed to the rear of the site in order to enter the subterranean parking levels.

Upon entering the lobby, visitors would encounter a large reception desk defining this space (Figure 26). The angle of this feature serves to accomplish several goals, as it serves people entering the building by car, as well as those who might enter on foot through the atrium. In addition, the angle is intended to re-orient its users' focus to Main Street. A large mirror running the length of its back wall reflects the street beyond, made possible by the reduction in massing of the building's south leg. At the west end of the site, a mezzanine level and small sculptural bar receive foot traffic from Front Street.



Figure 26. Perspective through lobby showing reception counter

The building's approach from the intersection of Main and Beale Streets, seen in Figure 27, perhaps provides the most telling information about its design. This view allows for the reading of its traditional massing strategy, as well as the interventions intended to reflect the building's role in selling the street's primary commodity, the experience of the city. At night, this view would become particularly important, as illumination from within would reveal its varying degrees of porosity, from operable panels screening the individual rooms, to outdoor terraces fronting Main Street on the north wing. In addition, this view evidences the different types of semi-public and private activities occurring throughout the site, encouraging pedestrians to enter into the illuminated atrium when concerts are occurring. From this approach, one would also begin to notice the placement of the restaurant, intended to stand out as an element distinct from the private parts of the hotel.



Figure 27. Approach from Main and Beale Streets

Intending to capitalize on ongoing development along the city's riverfront, the design also deals carefully with the approach along Beale Street, as it provides a link between this new development and the city's nightlife. In this capacity, the design seeks to embody ideas of intrigue and surprise associated with the idea of the Stranger's Path. Coming up from the riverfront, one would encounter a fairly traditional façade, acknowledging the role of this type of building in the traditional understanding of Main Street explained in this document. At the ground level, however, a series of perforated metal walls extend out of the structure, defining a path into the atrium, as well as the entry to the hotel's main bar. Once again, this approach would be particularly important at night, as the light coming from the atrium would take precedence, with lower levels of light attempting to subtly draw patrons into the bar as well.



Figure 28. Approach from Beale Street and the Riverfront

Within the atrium space, the design again seeks to place emphasis on Main Street and the experience of the city beyond. Even during events, such as concerts, the space would orient its users with this intent (Figure 29). In addition, the hotel rooms oriented into this space would begin to interact with its activity, as each room features pairs of double doors creating a balcony condition. Once again, these moves attempt to foster dialogue between the building's multiple types of users in order to encourage a more complex and comprehensive appreciation of the city. Rather than becoming an insular space intended for use only by the hotel's patrons, the atrium would serve as a hub of activity, indicating the new interpretation of how one understands Main Street's role in marketing the city.

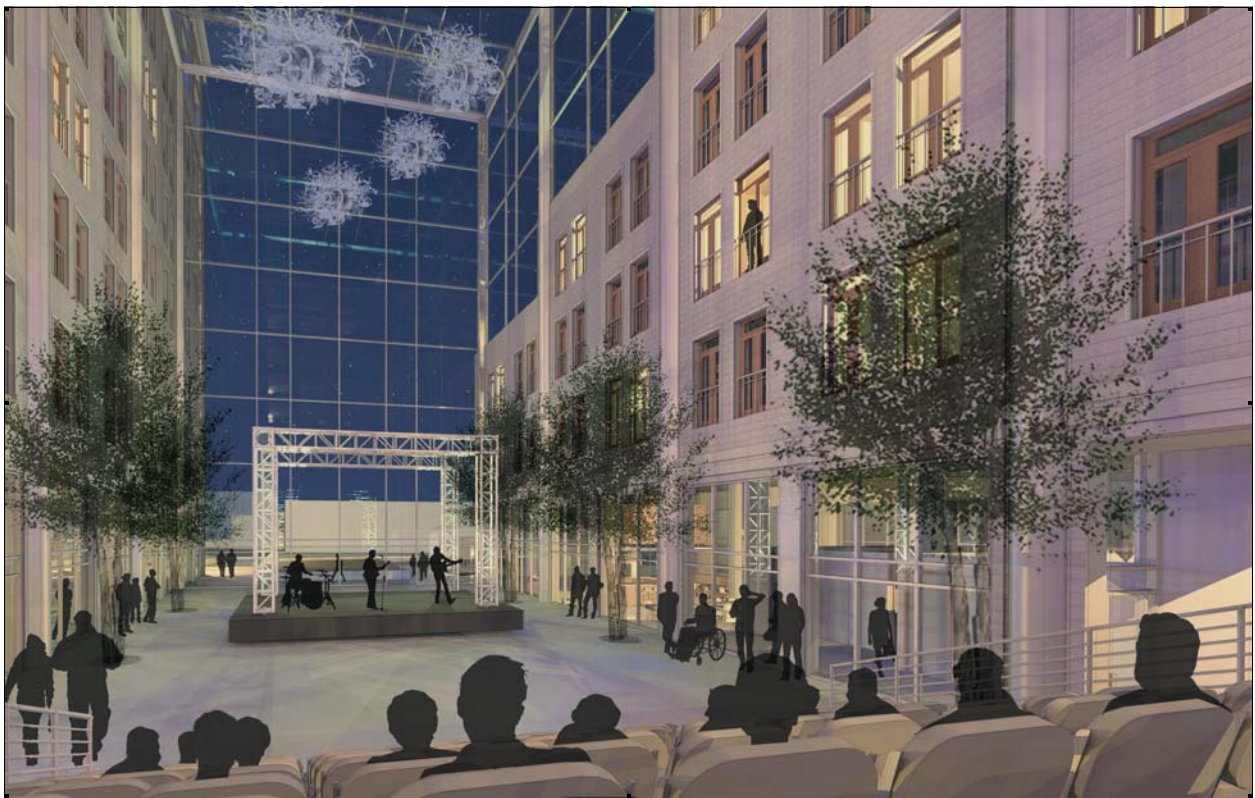


Figure 29. View from temporary concert seating in atrium, with Main Street beyond

Just as a major amount of effort put into the building's design attempted to deal with its interaction with Main Street at the ground level, a good deal of consideration was put into the design of its upper floors as well. Each of the hotel's floors feature elements intended to encourage users' understanding of the surrounding context from the interior, and express its complexities from the exterior. The typical layout of rooms features communal seating areas and terraces at the ends of the block, as well as individual balconies for each room. The shifting of mass discussed above allows for each room to have an unobstructed view of the surrounding city. In this way, selling an overnight stay in one of these rooms begins to become part of selling the experience of the city as well.



Figure 30. View from communal terrace showing intended interaction with the city beyond

Ultimately, the proposed design seeks to evidence the complexity of Main Street as the primary commercial corridor in the typical American city. In order to achieve this, the design makes use of some elements intended to reflect Main Street's true past, as well as several moves intended to change its users understanding of this street's history (Figure 31). Through its programming, materials, and massing, this design emphasizes the idea that Main Street doesn't need to be thought of as something frozen in time, but as an incredibly vibrant place well suited to the needs of its contemporary users.



Figure 31. Axonometric showing proposed design in its Main Street context

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION AND RECOMENDATIONS

Throughout the course of this project, investigating the history of Memphis' Main Street led to many surprises, and produced information that I did not expect to encounter about the site's past. For example, the conversion of an ice cream factory into a hotel within the first few year's of the building's existence suggested that even in the early-twentieth century, the street's use was changing frequently and with a certain degree of rapidity. The presence of an African-American roller-skating rink in 1907, later replaced by a furniture store, provided further interest. This multitude of surprises helped a great deal in strengthening my thoughts regarding the homogenous heritage that is often assigned to Main Street.

Designing a building that seeks to acknowledge a number of different contexts leads to a series of challenges. Attempting to create a cohesive design, while rejecting the idea of a homogenous aesthetic for a site proved to be a difficult task. In addition, resolving issues of access for different means of transportation created further challenges. Ultimately, however, these factors must be considered when dealing with contemporary interventions with our Main Streets. While some moves made regarding the building's massing were site specific, others could be applied to any Main Street. The massing strategies, treatment of materials, and shifting of program could all be applied in any situation where one seeks to use a site to market its surrounding environment, as well as to celebrate the complexity and importance of its role in American urban history.

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