

Mapping Main Street:
Tracing an American Political Mythology, Urban Imaginary and Built Environment

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Note: This paper is very much a work-in-progress. The goal here has been to begin an experiment in combining the political and urban history of Main Street with ideas of deep mapping and a creative project I am producing this summer. The long-term aim of this paper would be to become a chapter in an eventual dissertation on the interplay between mythology, media, and urban space.

Introduction

Since the publication of Sinclair Lewis's book *Main Street* in 1920, Main Street has been a highly contested, shifting metaphor for what constitutes traditional American values and the "average" American experience. Since the Great Depression through today, Main Street has been deployed by the left as a form of populist revolt against Wall Street's monied interests. On the right, Main Street has been a tool for provoking anger at a perceived elitism of Washington politicians and a wedge for instigating the culture wars. The urban imaginary of Main Street evokes the 19th century small town center, the image commodified by Walt Disney as Main Street, USA. However, the term's urban history ranges as far back 17th century New England villages and Spanish presidios and missions. And today, Main Street is a national movement for historic preservation and the revitalization of decaying downtowns, as a well as an aesthetic moniker for New Urbanist design and exclusive lifestyle center developments. The built environment of Main Street, constituted by the physical forms that dot its thousands of miles of streets and the everyday practices of its millions of inhabitants, tells a story that constantly complexifies its political mythology and urban imaginary. There are Main Streets in every city throughout the country. Not just historic downtowns, Main Streets are suburban cul-de-sacs, blocks of the 1950s strip malls, and the food courts on America's military bases throughout the world. Read together,

these corridors of commerce and community present a highly variegated picture of America's past, present, and future political and urban history.

In addition to brief sketches of Main Street's political and urban history, I propose deep mapping as a potential method for gaining new insights into American cities. Deep mapping is a creative methodology rooted in the antiquarian practices of the 17th century, the aesthetic experiments of the modernist avant-garde, and the networked potentials of today's new media. Deep mapping is a holistic mode of thinking and practice that addresses the multiplicity of built forms and creative expressions that constitute urbanism, giving particular attention to the density of personal stories embedded in social space. Lastly, these historical and theoretical speculations provide the basis for introducing *Mapping Main Street*, an interdisciplinary, multimedia project I am initiating this summer that aims to unsettle assumptions about Main Street.

History of Main Street as Cultural Critique and Political Mythology

In the 2008 election and during the current financial crisis, Main Street has become political shorthand for "average" Americans. Distinct from the rich, financial elite embodied by Wall Street, the Main Street evoked in political rhetoric aims to represent the hardworking men and women of the United States, those who over the decades have lived within their means, raised solid families, and supported strong communities. While this political mythology sprung onto the stage during the initial crashes of September 2008, it has a long history in the 20th century.¹

In 1920s America, Main Street was a major source of popular political and cultural debate. The ferment was ignited by Sinclair Lewis's novel *Main Street*, a satire of small-town values

¹ This history draws upon Berkeley linguist Geoff Nunberg's commentary "Parsing the Politics of Main Street" that aired on NPR's *Fresh Air*, October 9, 2008.

published in 1920. Protagonist Carol Kennicott rebels against the norms and conventions of her upbringing, ridiculing the narrow-mindedness of small-town culture. *Main Street* was immediately a bestseller, selling more copies than any other novel in the first quarter of the 20th century in the United States. As George Killough writes, “It reached even beyond the normal book market, appearing on household shelves that bore only a handful of volumes besides the Bible.”²

Tongue in cheek, Lewis sets the stage for the novel as the mythical embodiment of his critique of small-town American culture on the opening page. He writes:

This is America—a town of a few thousand, in a region of wheat and corn and dairies and little groves.

The town is, in our tale, called “Gopher Prairie, Minnesota.” But its Main Street is the continuation of Main Streets everywhere. The story would be the same in Ohio or Montana, in Kansas or Kentucky or Illinois, and not very differently would it be told in Up York State or in the Carolina hills.

Main Street is the climax of civilization. That this Ford car might stand in front of the Bon Ton Store, Hannibal invaded Rome and Erasmus wrote in Oxford cloisters. What Ole Jenson the grocer says to Ezra Stowbody the banker is the new law for London, Prague and the unprofitable isles of the sea; whatsoever Ezra does not know and sanction, that thing is heresy, worthless for knowing and wicked to consider.

Our railway station is the final aspiration of architecture. Sam Clark’s annual hardware turnover is the envy of the four counties which constitute God’s Country. In the sensitive art of the Rosebud Movie Palace there is a Message, and humor is strictly moral.

Such is our comfortable tradition and sure faith. Would he not betray himself an alien cynic who should otherwise portray Main Street, or distress the citizens by speculating whether there may not be other faiths?

Gopher Prairie was based on Lewis’s hometown of Sauk Centre, Minnesota. Immediately following the publication, the town was outraged at Lewis’s negative portrait.

² George Killough, “Introduction,” in *Main Street* (New York: Signet Classics, 2008): 5.

But Main Street quickly transformed from a derogatory term to a source of pride for many, as people came to defend the culture of small-town America. In her 1921 essay “Let Main Street Alone,” Indiana novelist Meredith Nicholson wrote:

The Main Streets I know do not strike as a fit subject for commiseration. I refuse to be sorry for them. I am increasingly impressed by their intelligence, their praiseworthy curiosity as to things of good report, their sturdy optimism, their unshakable ambition to excel other Main Streets. There is, to be sure, a type of village with a few stores, a blacksmith-shop, and a gasolene station, that seems to express the ultimate in torpor. Settlements of this story may be found in every State, and the older the State the more complete seems to be their inertia. But where five thousand people are assembled—or better, when we deal with a metropolis of ten or twelve thousand souls—we are at once conscious of a pulse that keeps time with the world’s heart-beat. There are compensations for those who abide in such places. In such towns, it is quite possible, if you an amiable being, to know well-nigh every one. The main thoroughfare is a place of fascinations, the stage for a continuing drama. Carrier delivery destroys the old joy of meeting all the folks at the post office, but most of the citizens, male and female, find some excuse for a daily visit to Main Street. They are bound together by dear and close ties. You’ve got to know your neighbors whether you want to or not, and it’s well for the health of your soul to know them and be of use to them when you can. I should regard it as a calamity to be deprived of the felicity of my occasional visits to a particular centre of enlightenment and cheer that I have in mind.³

For Nicholson, Main Street is the foundation for neighborliness and a tight-knit community. With the words of authors like Nicholson at their back, the town of Sauk Centre embraced the identity of Main Street. In 1925, the local high school renamed their sports teams the Mainstreeters, and the name remains today.

Main Street became further entrenched in the lexicon of politics in 1928 due to a competition held by the Democratic Party for a new slogan to guide their candidates in that year’s election. Mrs. Wilbur Hubbard of Chestertown, Maryland won with the phrase: “Eight Years of Wall Street; Now Give Main Street a Chance.” Hubbard’s clever slogan introduced Main Street as a political mythology independent from its geographical characteristics, standing in for the identities of those ordinary Americans that shared the values of hard work and community. When

³ Meredith Nicholson, “Let Main Street Alone!,” in *The Man in the Street* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1921): 13.

Wall Street collapsed in 1929 and the country entered the Great Depression, Main Street became a rallying cry for populists around the nation disgusted by the greed that had infested modern America.

The political mythology of Main Street morphed after World War II. The notion of “ordinary Americans” became the foundation for the Republican Party’s revolt against the liberal social movements of the 1960s. Richard Nixon directly targeted the “forgotten Americans” or “silent majority,” those lower-middle class whites resistant to the transformation of the nation’s cultural values and disapproving of protest against the war in Vietnam. In 1969, the *TIME Magazine* “Men and Women of the Year were the Middle Americans.” The article asked, “Who precisely are the Middle Americans?” The answer: “The lower middle class, including blue-collar workers, service employees and farm workers, numbers some 40 million. Many of the nation's 20 million elderly citizens, frequently living on fixed incomes, are Middle Americans. So is a substantial portion of the 36 million white-collar workers. Although a hard figure is not possible, the total of Middle Americans possibly approaches 100 million, or half the U.S. population.” Not only a demographic group, *TIME* defined Middle Americans geographically, located “in the nation's heartland more than on its coasts.” But most of all, *TIME* described Middle America as “a state of mind, a morality, a construct of values and prejudices and a complex of fears. The Man and Woman of the Year represent a vast, unorganized fraternity bound together by a roughly similar way of seeing things.”⁴ Ordinary Americans and the mythology of Main Street was no longer a voice of liberal populism, but instead had morphed into a breed of reactionary populism, the bedrock of the Reagan Revolution and the ensuing culture wars.

⁴ “The Middle Americans,” *TIME Magazine*, Jan. 5, 1970.

The election of Barack Obama marks another transformation in the political history of the Main Street mythology. During his victory speech on November 4th in Chicago's Grant Park, Obama said, "Let us remember that, if this financial crisis taught us anything, it's that we cannot have a thriving Wall Street while Main Street suffers. In this country, we rise or fall as one nation, as one people." 80 years later, Obama's rhetoric echoes Hubbard's slogan. Main Street is no longer a wedge in the culture wars, but instead a rallying cry for a radical change in the nation's economic priorities and practices. The traditional values of hard work and community that Nicholson espoused are no longer exclusively the territory of cultural conservatism and laissez-faire economics, but are once again integral to a new form of liberalism and a renewed national unity.

The History of Main Street as Urban Space and Imaginary

Main Street is not only a political mythology, but also a series of real places in cities across America. The evolution of Main Street is a fundamental dimension of the history of American urbanism.⁵ In conjunction with the rise of major metropolises such as New York and Chicago in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the growth of the modern city coincided with the boom of small towns across the United States. Nodes within an expanding national and international network of commerce and culture, these towns sprouted up along railroad lines, industrial canals, religious missions, commercial riverways, agricultural centers, and terrestrial trade routes. These towns each developed unique forms of architectural expression, but shared a similar urbanistic form. Drawing on the legacy of New England's villages, American town development was focused around a central commercial, political, and social corridor known as Main Street. Ranging from

⁵ This section draws heavily upon two integral books. Carole Rifkind's *Main Street: The Face of America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977) and Chester Liebs's *Main Street to Miracle Mile: American Roadside Architecture* (New York: New York Graphic Society Books, 1985).

one to multiple blocks, Main Street was the epicenter of town life, housing such institutions as local banks, county courthouses, city halls, pharmacies, lodges, attorneys offices, and a host of other services integral to the local community.

Main Street was transformed by the growth of the automobile as a widespread form of private transportation in the early 20th century. New businesses such as gas stations and motels began to cater directly to automobile traffic and grew up on the edges of towns, along commercial strips known as Miracle Miles. As the automobile became an irreplaceable feature of cities and the driver of urban development, the historic businesses that dotted Main Street began to suffer. Already a prominent force in the 1920s and 1930s, urban decentralization accelerated following World War II. These urban transformations were brought about by a combination of federally-subsidized mortgages, massive public infrastructure projects catering to the automobile, including the construction of the national interstate highway system in 1956, and a revolution in affordable housing construction methods and technologies. Simultaneously, the form and function of commercial architecture was transformed by the advent of the enclosed shopping mall, pioneered by the Southdale Mall in Edina, Minnesota by Victor Gruen in 1956.

Cities and towns of all scales changed dramatically during this period of decentralization. While some historic Main Streets continued to thrive, many suffered economically. Small businesses closed as consumers shifted their allegiances to new shopping malls. The tax base of cities declined as new residents and businesses moved to unincorporated communities outside the municipal boundaries. Main Streets and downtowns that once supported a highly diverse population of various classes, races, and ethnicities became increasingly homogenous and ghettoized. Many African-Americans who had moved from the south to northern and western

cities for manufacturing jobs during the war, were concentrated in historic, often-run-down neighborhoods.

Federal and local governments responded to these dramatic economic, social, and physical transformations through a variety of programs known as urban renewal. Initiated with the Housing Act of 1949, urban renewal aimed to reclaim so-called blighted areas in urban centers for increased tax revenue. Initially, the program required cities to destroy existing housing in order to qualify for funds from the federal government to construct new buildings. The reigning ideology of urban renewal drew inspiration from CIAM's 1933 Charter of Athens, which called for the elimination of the mixed-use metropolis in favor of the segregation of the city into distinct functions such as living, working, recreation, and circulation. The initial projects of urban renewal in the 1950s (e.g. Boston's West End), consisted of wholesale demolition of tight-knit, mixed-use, working-class communities and the construction of single-use, modernist developments. However, approaches to urban renewal quickly changed in many instances, as groups organized to halt freeway developments and advocate for the adaptive re-use of existing buildings.

The resistance to urban renewal coincided with a massive transformation of urban values within the planning and design professions. The 19th and early 20th century city that was once seen as inefficient, dirty, dark, and dangerous was re-interpreted as an ideal form of city development. Published in 1961, Jane Jacobs's landmark book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* became the bible for this new movement of historic preservation and community design. Thousands of buildings were placed under landmark status, thus preventing their destruction and preserving the pre-war urban fabric. In the 1970s, the National Trust for Historic

Preservation pioneered the Main Street approach, aimed at revitalizing historic town centers through architectural preservation and local entrepreneurship.

In conjunction with this new movement that championed the urban values of the early modern city, many American cities and towns continued to grow rapidly on their periphery. Instead of being located downtown, major corporate headquarters were established on greenfields outside city limits and in close proximity to major interstate highways. By the 1980s, whole new urban forms known as Edge Cities had emerged, where major commercial, corporate, and residential uses were agglomerated around highway interchanges.⁶

While American cities continued to grow on their edges, center cities were transforming. The economic foundation of many cities was shifting from manufacturing to a service and knowledge economy, and these changes had direct impact upon urban form. The pillars of these growing economic sectors were high-rise office towers housing banks, insurance, and real estate companies, often built on reclaimed and landfill land in downtown centers (e.g. Docklands in London and Battery Park City in New York). Downtown neighborhoods that were once primarily working-class communities, were now attractive to the higher-earning residents of these expanding industries. Abetted by the low tax policies of the Reagan administration, the American population became increasingly polarized, as the middle-class diminished and people found themselves either increasingly wealthy or increasingly poor. This social transformation could be witnessed in the changing form of American cities, with the growth of enclave developments such as gated communities and the rise of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) that worked

⁶ For a more developed conceptualization of Edge Cities see Joel Garreau's *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

tirelessly to eliminate homeless people and others deemed to be social threats by those holding the new financial power in city's historic districts.

While development continued on the urban edges in the 1990s and early 21st century, the communities once built on the city's edge through the 1950s and 1980s witnessed significant transformation. New immigrants and minorities increasingly inhabited these so-called inner-ring suburbs, and the shopping malls and commercial strips surrounding these neighborhoods were simultaneously transformed. The suburbs had never been the lily-white communities imagined by popular media. Now, no one can deny that the majority of Americans, ranging across all classes, races, and ethnicities live in the so-called suburbs. Throughout these ethnoburbs, strip malls and new retail developments are often the most important forms of commercial development, together forming a network of work and community that can be seen as a new incarnation of America's Main Street.

Initiated in 1993, the Congress for the New Urbanism marks another re-imagining of Main Street. A reactionary movement against the supposed evils of sprawl, the architecture and urban form of the traditional American village has become the driving aesthetic for this group of designers. Concerned more with the aesthetic features of traditional cities than the social and economic diversity that gave the city of the 19th and early 20th century its unique character, New Urbanism has become a paradigm for developers interested in increasing density and offering a real estate product effectively branded for a segment of the nation's middle and upper class. In parallel to New Urbanism, Main Street has re-surfaced as a name for a genre of shopping malls known as "lifestyle centers" that deploy traditional architectural features and are centered upon open-air shopping streets.

The turn-of-the-century downtown and Main Street that formed the nexus of urbanity in the age of the centralized metropolis is now but one of many integral points of commerce and community in the urban region of the average American city. Looking at the American city today, Main Street requires a new history and future. While valuable in its contributions to the revitalization of many American towns and cities, the perspective of historic preservation fails to address the vitality of the decentralized commercial corridors and shopping malls that form the basis of millions of Americans' everyday life and serve vital community functions. A new metropolitan history is necessary to understand the particularities of these spaces and the lives of their inhabitants.

Some Notes on the Average and Ordinary in Politics and Urbanism

The history of Main Street as an American political mythology and urban imaginary is deeply entwined with notions of the ordinary and average. As Kevin O'Keefe explains in his book *The Average American*, the country has a long and complicated relationship with the idea of being average. To begin his odyssey to locate the quintessential "average" American, O'Keefe recounts the historical experiments of Belgian statistician Lambert Adolphe Jacques Quetelet. Beginning in 1827, Quetelet set out on the mission to define the demographically average person on the planet, believing that "If an individual at any given epoch of society possessed all the qualities of the average man, he would represent all that is great, good or beautiful."⁷ Emblematic of the era's fascination with objective knowledge, scientific quantification, and racial typologies, Quetelet's explorations presented statistical charts for average individuals, using such measurements as

⁷ Quoted in Kevin O'Keefe, *The Average American* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005): 2.

height, weight, age, profession, and geographical region. The impact of Quetelet's studies was tremendous. Stephen Stigler wrote in his 1986 book *The History of Statistics* that "the average man was a fictional being in his creator's eye, but such was his appeal that he underwent a transformation, like Pinnochio or Pygmalion's statue, so that he still lives in headlines of our daily newspapers."⁸ Moreover, Quetelet's study prepared him for the creation of Belgium's national census in 1846, which quickly became the international standard-bearer. United States Congressman James Garfield even went so far as to meet personally with Quetelet to discuss how to improve the U.S. census. The mythology of the "average" man became a touchstone for political movements throughout the 20th century across the political spectrum, from fascism to populism, conservatism to liberalism.

The search for the "average" American directly coincided with the debates surrounding Lewis's *Main Street* and the massive urban transformations taking place during the metropolitanism of the 1920s. Muncie, Indiana, a small industrial town one-hour northeast of Indianapolis became the center stage for social scientists Howard and Helen Lynd's classic publication *Middletown*. Originally titled the Small City Study, *Middletown* was begun in 1924 and grandly declared itself to be "a study in contemporary American culture." The Lynds lived in Muncie for two and half years, immersing themselves in the local community. Almost all residents of the city interacted with the two scientists in some way, as they presented extensive questionnaires to local students, sat-down for hour-long interviews in the homes of working families, attended regular meetings of city business leaders, amongst many research strategies. As Sarah Igo recounts, the two authors "read anything they could find from the town's 'frontier days'

⁸ Quoted in O'Keefe: 2.

of the 1890s, including diaries, yearbooks, scrapbooks, school examination questions, and minutes of organizations such as the Ministerial Association and the Women's Club.... No fact or observation seemed too trivial to include in their purview, from the contents of seventh-grade school curricula to that of popular movies, from the number of hours spent washing to the size of Middletowners' backyards, from attitudes toward labor unions to opinions on whether 'the United States is unquestionably the best country in the world.'"⁹ The degree of in-depth observation was so intense that many locals asked whether it violated their privacy rights and saw it more as a form of invasion. This form of questioning and research was a precursor to the political and consumer surveys that appeared in the next decade and that are now a fundamental feature of America's self-understanding.

The Lynds were concerned with how to "look at the life of a city objectively." Both were fascinated by the concept of applying anthropological methods to "native soil," hoping to develop the same insights into American culture that anthropologists had gained about "primitive" ones. Previous social scientific studies of the 19th century or the contemporaneous work of the Chicago School were reform-minded, focusing upon the behavior and lives of such subjects as prostitutes, the urban poor, or new immigrant workers. The Lynds, instead, chose Muncie, Indiana as their field site specifically because of its disproportionate lack of African-Americans and immigrants. They believed that by limiting the number of such "foreign elements," the work could more easily zoom in upon "average" white Americans, a population they claimed had a distinct culture that had been under-researched. As Sarah Igo writes, "The fact that the site the Lynds selected would

⁹ Sarah Igo, *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens and the Making of a Mass Public* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007): 36 and 39.

earn a cultural status as America's most typical of communities, this decision would have far-reaching consequences.... Their social scientific account resembled contemporary fictional works such as Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* and *Babbitt*, in its equation of white natives and American culture."¹⁰ To the surprise of everyone, *Middletown*, over 500 pages chock-full of dry statistics and charts, became a bestseller. With the book's success, Muncie became widely entrenched in the popular imagination as the nation's most average city.

The study of "average" urbanism must not necessarily become a normative practice, as it did in the case of *Middletown*. The challenge for scholarship is to think Muncie and the South Side of Chicago together, as opposed to selecting one over the other. Instead of holding up a single place as representative of a whole, the aim should be to establish a network of fragments that highlight commonality and difference. While not accepting statistical data as objective truth, paying attention to statistical averages forces us to step beyond our assumptions and confront the ordinary people and spaces that often fall outside the domain of academic scholarship. As Igo writes, "Taking seriously the possibility of not just imagined, but *statistical*, communities will help us uncover the knowledge regimes and intellectual frameworks that allowed Americans to relate in new ways to 'the public.' That many believed they lived in a mass society does not mean that this was so. However, if we are to understand how this new society operates — at the level of perception, if not of fact — we will need to put aside questions of reality for more ephemeral, although hardly less important, ones of thought and belief.... We will also, against at least a half century of scholarship and commentary, have to rethink 'the mass' itself: as a social experience

¹⁰ Sarah Igo, *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens and the Making of a Mass Public* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007): 55.

distinguished as much by connection as conformity, and composed of actors better described as self-conscious than submissive.”¹¹

From the perspective of the built environment, to critically engage something such as “average urbanism” requires open-minded research into developer-built housing, automobile culture, shopping malls — in short, the conditions that make-up of the majority of our built environment. Geographically, attention to averageness requires us to move beyond an exclusive fascination with one-of-a-kind urbanisms such as New York and expand our focus to more common conditions shared by cities and towns in states such as Indiana, Arizona, Kansas, Arkansas, etc. A political and urban history of Main Street must pay sincere attention to the cultural mythologies of the nation’s mainstream, while constantly unsettling the stability of these mythologies. Such a method would simultaneously think majorities and minorities, developing a constant dialectic between the particular and universal, the margin and the center, the avant-garde and the popular.

The Archaeological Imagination and Deep Mapping

Michael Shanks is a Cambridge-trained archaeologist and classicist whose academic and artistic work has been devoted to subverting entrenched positivist conceptions of the archaeological discipline. Drawing inspiration from a remarkably varied field of references, Shanks’s conception of archaeology “stretches from genetics to art history, includes laboratory study, fieldwork and survey, statistical analysis, and textual interpretation, combining media old

¹¹ Ibid. 21.

and new.”¹² Shanks aims to work in a constant double-movement between practice and research, whereby the academy becomes an art studio and “old disciplinary divisions give way to a committed address to matters of common human concern.”¹³ With such an attitude, it is not surprising that Shanks sees Walter Benjamin as “one of the few historians who has dealt with this character of archaeological or material sources.”¹⁴ For Shanks, the *Arcades Project* is one of modernity’s greatest archaeological achievements, “a phantasmagoric collage of fragments, apparently unconnected remains of the life of a city.”¹⁵

The core of archaeology is the interface between materiality and temporality. However, the discipline is not situated in the past, as some would believe, nor is it motivated by a drive to reconstruct an imagined history. Instead, archaeology is concerned with the encounter of lived human experience and the past. Like memory, archaeology is performed in the actuality of the present, in a moment necessarily entwined with the past and projecting towards the future. Shanks writes, “Archaeology refers to ruination, the materiality which we are, to an order of temporality by which we are partially constituted. It deals with the gaps between things - the dirt which is trapped between floor tiles.”¹⁶ Concerned with garbage and lacunae, the often-

¹² Michael Shanks, “Archaeological manifesto,” retrieved from <http://documents.stanford.edu/MichaelShanks/112> on January 10, 2009.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Michael Shanks, “Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past,” retrieved from <http://documents.stanford.edu/MichaelShanks/227> on January 10, 2009.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

overlooked and seemingly ordinary, archaeology shifts attention to impressions and footprints, requiring an “ichnography — a science of traces.”¹⁷

In Shanks’s thought, such a conception of archaeology coincides with a specific understanding of modernity. Echoing Andreas Huyssen, Svetlana Boym, and others, Shanks argues, “modernity is unthinkable without its museal and archaeological component.”¹⁸ Going further, Shanks argues that in modernity “we are all archaeologists, even if we don't realize it. We share now an archaeological sensibility - working on what is left of the past.”¹⁹ But the archaeological sites of modernity are not only the remains of buildings, the legacy of monuments, the archives of political leaders. Instead, places like “landfill sites are modernity’s ruins,” along with the forgotten corners of the metropolis.²⁰

In order for the archaeologist to engage modernity’s ruins, Shanks argues that one must deploy both an “Archaeological Sensibility” and an “Archaeological Imagination.” For him, “Sensibility refers us to the perceptual components of how we engage with the remains of the past. Imagination refers us to the creative component - to the transforming work that is done on what is left over.”²¹ The practice of archaeology is necessarily both scholarly and artistic, equally committed to historical analysis and projective imagination, requiring traditional methods of academic research and the creative application of new media and modes of engagement.

¹⁷ Michael Shanks, “The Archaeological Imagination,” retrieved from <http://documents.stanford.edu/MichaelShanks/57> on January 10, 2009.

¹⁸ Michael Shanks, David Platt, William L. Rathje, “The Perfume of Garbage: Modernity and the Archaeological,” in *MODERNISM / modernity*, vol. 11, number 1 (2004): 64.

¹⁹ Michael Shanks, “Archaeographer,” retrieved from <http://documents.stanford.edu/MichaelShanks/44> on January 10, 2009.

²⁰ Shanks, “The Perfume of Garbage: Modernity and the Archaeological”: 67.

²¹ Michael Shanks, “The Archaeological Imagination.”

Performing an archaeology of Shanks's work itself, certain fragments consistently reappear. I would argue that his project is motivated by a desire to critically question how we relate land and inhabitation, aiming fundamentally to reconnect place and land with the rhetorical features of memory. Not specifically urban, Shanks's work is focused upon landscape, a broader term that addresses both the city and the country, foregrounding the necessarily interwoven forces of natural processes and cultural production. "Deep mapping" is one of the methods Shanks proposes for uncovering and establishing new forms of connection between people and places. According to Shanks, "the deep map attempts to record and represent the grain and patina of place through juxtapositions and interpenetrations of the historical and the contemporary, the political and the poetic, the discursive and the sensual; the conflation of oral testimony, anthology, memoir, biography, natural history and everything you might ever want to say about a place."²² This conception of deep mapping draws upon Shanks's research into the practice of chorography, a term used to refer to antiquarian studies of topography, place, community, history, and memory in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A particular form of pre-Enlightenment knowledge and practice, chorography was lost with the consolidation of disciplines of space and place in the late eighteenth century, subsumed under geography and topography.

The deep map is neither the exclusive product of imagination, nor a rejection of scientific methods. Instead, it intermingles fantasy and reality like a phantasmagoria, those particular nineteenth century forms of optical illusions produced by means of magic lantern. Or more broadly, as the Oxford English Dictionary says, a phantasmagoria is "a

²² Michael Shanks and Mike Pearson, *Theatre/Archaeology* (New York: Routledge, 2001): 64-65.

sequence of real or imaginary images like that seen in a dream.”²³ As artist Clifford McLucas writes,

Deep maps will not seek the authority and objectivity of conventional cartography. They will be politicized, passionate, and partisan. They will involve negotiation and contestation over who and what is represented and how. They will give rise to debate about the documentation and portrayal of people and places.... Deep maps will bring together the amateur and the professional, the artist and the scientist, the official and the unofficial, the national and the local.... Deep maps will be unstable, fragile and temporary. They will be a conversation and not a statement.²⁴

Deep mapping plays the traditions of the humanities and sciences off each other, blurring the boundaries of fact and fiction, demarcating a new terrain of place-based subjectivities. By combining such a multiplicity of perspectives and temporalities, the deep map may give rise to a conversation with the heterogeneity that constitutes the contemporary past of our common landscapes.

Deep Mapping Main Street

Main Street is both a contested political mythology and specific urbanistic form. This unique confluence of political and urban history make Main Street an ideal vehicle for an excavation of our contemporary past with the aim of enriching our understanding of America and its cities today. When politicians, the media, and urban boosters mention Main Street, they are often only talking about one mythical people and place. But there are 3,634 streets named Main in America. This summer, I am initiating *Mapping Main Street*, a national collaborative documentary media project that aims to unsettle assumptions about Main Street by recording photos, videos

²³ "phantasmagoria *noun*," *The Oxford Dictionary of English* (revised edition), Ed. Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson, Oxford University Press, 2005. Oxford Reference Online. Oxford University Press. Harvard University Library. 10 January 2009 <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t140.e58180>>

²⁴ Clifford McLucas, "Deep Mapping," retrieved from <http://documents.stanford.edu/MichaelShanks/51> on January 10, 2009.

and stories on every Main Street in the country.

There are thousands of streets named Main across the country in all 50 states. From New York City to Omaha, Kansas City to San Francisco, Galesburg, Ill. to Houston, Wasilla to Scranton. Some of the streets are the historic commercial centers, emblematic of the Main Street imaginary evoked in Lewis's novel including blocks of brick buildings, a hardware store, a pharmacy, and a soda fountain. However, many streets named Main are cul-de-sacs in mid-century suburban developments (e.g. Honolulu), primary strips for prostitution (e.g. Chattanooga) or the central arteries of military-industrial complexes (e.g. Norfolk). Instead of accepting the abstract unity of Main Street as a political constituency, a complex patchwork of individual and collective identities might emerge through the stories of those people that live and work on America's actual Main Streets.

A collaborative production between myself, public radio producers Kara Oehler and Ann Heppermann, economist James Burns, and interactive design studio Local Projects, *Mapping Main Street* will combine scholarly research and writing with a national radio series, original songs, and a map-based website that fosters community participation. The goal is to pioneer a new form of academic research and public media that offers a constantly-evolving, multimedia perspective on the state of American life and urbanism in a period that is undergoing major social, economic, and physical transformations. *Mapping Main Street* aims to uncover new methods of urban research and representation, utilizing participatory media to create a new form of ethnography.

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