

**ADAPTING THE US MAIN STREET  
PHILOSOPHY AND PROGRAM  
TO THE ROMANIAN URBAN CONTEXT.  
COULD IT POSSIBLY WORK?**

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*The analysis herein explores the topic of downtown revitalization and focuses on a specific strategy, namely the Main Street approach, as a venue for addressing physical decay, business retention, and historic preservation within small cities/communities throughout the entire US. The paper also addresses how the main street philosophy could be used to deal with urban problems in a completely different setting – Romanian cities – and which would be the steps Romanian public authorities at both the central and local level need to undertake in order to implement a Main Street Program in Romania.*

*The paper has a threefold structure. In the first section the focus is on the US urban context. A brief analysis of the causes that have generated the decline of downtowns and their commercial/business districts is provided. It is underscored that cities are not merely the passive recipients of change; rather decision-makers have the ability to make choices that maximize the assets the community has while minimizing the obstacles they face. The Main Street program implemented by the National Trust for Historic Preservation is described as one possible strategy aiming at the revitalization of downtowns and commercial/business districts. The focus is on assessing how such a strategy responds to the challenges downtowns face. The Main Street approach is then compared and contrasted against other possible downtown redevelopment strategies. In the second part of the paper the focus shifts from the US context to Romanian cities. A brief analysis of the problems Romanian municipalities face with regard to downtowns is provided. The authors argue that the main street approach is relevant and worth taking into consideration as a counterpoint to urban sprawl - (increase in the number of retailers and malls at the outskirts of the urban cores, decline of open space and opportunities for leisure in the downtown, increase in the number of suburban single family residences, etc) - that could possibly affect the vitality of Romanian downtowns on the long term. A framework for the implementation of a main street program in the context of Romanian cities is proposed and described.*

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*In the conclusion section it is argued that the Main Street program both in the case of US and Romanian cities does not represent a panacea for all the ills downtowns and commercial districts are confronted with; it represents nonetheless a powerful tool that can be used in order to meet certain objectives such as beautification, physical improvements, business retention/attraction, etc. A specific challenge for the creation and implementation of a Main Street program in Romania would be to identify or create an organization similar to the National Trust for Historic Preservation that would be able to lend its prestige and “brand” to the program so that on the long term a more decentralized vision with regard to the program could become feasible.*

## **I. US Main Street Program**

### **□ The decline of American downtowns and central business districts**

American inner cities and their central business districts (CBDs) have experienced enormous decline in the post World War II era and only the most inattentive observer could fail to notice it. The inner city decline has manifested itself in pockets of vacant or underutilized land; abandoned residential, commercial, and industrial buildings; diminished public infrastructure; population loss; and resultant social problems (Hamlin and Lyons, 1996).

Several forces are commonly cited as contributing to the decline of American inner city business districts in the post-war era. Major demographic shifts in American cities that lead to both a declining central-city population and a concentration of the poor in urban neighborhoods are key factors cited by many authors (Savitch & Kantor 2002, Bright 2000). Economic trends and public policies also contributed to inner-city decline. Numerous authors point to deconcentration (Savitch & Kantor 2002) or dispersion incentives (Grogan & Proscio 2000) under federal policies that subsidized highway and suburban housing construction, along with redlining practices that favored suburban over central-city investment. Bright (2000) also comments on how zoning and tax policies at both the state and the local level contributed to business flight to the suburbs, property abandonment, and housing segregation by income.

These demographic and income trends affected the viability of business districts that were tied to surrounding residential neighborhoods. Many merchants followed their customers to the suburbs. Changes in the economic landscape with the emergence of suburbs as employment and retail centers fueled inner city business district decline (Seidman 2005). The decline was further augmented by the proliferation of suburban shopping centers, office campuses, theme parks, and entertainment centers, and the steady erosion of downtown’s and main street’s share of shoppers and workers (Houstoun 2003).

Successful revitalization approaches need to capitalize on the opportunities presented in inner city neighborhoods while addressing long-standing obstacles to their rebirth (Seidman 2005).

Porter (1995) points out four competitive advantages in inner cities: (1) strategic location near the city center, transportation, entertainment and tourist centers, (2) local market demand reflected in high density that compensates for lower incomes, and specialized urban ethnic market niches; (3) integration with regional clusters (defined by Porter as unique to a region collections of related companies that are competitive nationally and globally), and (4) moderate wage force. Other scholars underscore the importance of these assets. McBee (1992) also emphasizes the location advantage inner cities have. Florida (2002) was among the first scholars to explore the importance of immigrants for downtown redevelopment and to suggest how underserved ethnic groups could represent niche opportunities for small businesses downtown.

However besides significant assets downtowns are confronted with dramatic challenges. Based on an extensive literature review Seidman (2005) identifies six major obstacles to redevelopment: (1) decaying physical conditions; (2) poor customer and investor perceptions of neighborhoods, (3)

difficulties in coordinating the actions of property owners, businesses, and local government; (4) a business environment that is more costly and complex than in suburban location; (5) the limited capacity and quality of businesses serving the commercial districts and (6) limited access to capital. Other scholars also underscore how objective realities and negative perceptions about downtowns reinforce each other and perpetuate a vicious cycle of disinvestment (Hamlin 2002).

#### ❑ **Revitalization strategies. District management strategies: Historic preservation and the Main Street approach**

Seidman (2005) underscores that much of the revitalization of downtown, low-income neighborhoods has been framed within two policy debates. One debate contrasts the benefits of place-based (the focus is on improving overall neighborhood conditions) versus people-based (the focus is on improving the well-being of individuals and expanding their access to economic opportunity and residential choice) approaches to community development. A second debate concerns the viability of neighborhood versus regional economic development strategies. While Seidman acknowledges the validity of these theoretical paradigms, he underscores that in practice such dichotomies are often counterproductive. As a result he argues in favor of a combination of both people-based and place-based as well as neighborhood and regional redevelopment efforts. Based on the existing literature he proposes a new typology of redevelopment strategies aiming at revitalizing downtowns and central business districts. Seidman (2005) contends that all redevelopment strategies fall under one of the six following categories: (1) comprehensive community initiatives, (2) enterprise zones, (3) housing-based strategies, (4) commercial real estate-based strategies; (5) business development and attraction strategies; and (6) district management strategies.

Seidman (2005) describes district management strategies as seeking to address the overall management of a business district in order to improve its ability to compete with shopping malls in attracting shoppers, businesses, and investment. District management strategies, Seidman underscores, work to coordinate the actions of the many parties whose actions shape the overall quality of the business district environment. According to Seidman (2005) there are three different district management approaches that have been used in downtowns: business improvement districts, centralized retail management, and Main Street program.

The Main Street program is perhaps the most widely used district management strategy. The National Trust for Historic Preservation developed this concept in the late 1970s based on a pilot experiment conducted in three cities. Since then the program has gradually grown in scope.

#### ❑ **National Trust for Historic Preservation**

The National Trust for Historic Preservation is a private, nonprofit membership organization dedicated to saving historic places and revitalizing America's communities. In the late 1940s, leaders of the growing American preservation movement recognized a need for a national organization to support and encourage grassroots efforts. Their efforts came to fruition when President Truman signed legislation creating the National Trust on October 26, 1949. The Trust's mission is "to provide leadership, education, advocacy and resources to save America's diverse historic places and revitalize our communities" (National Trust for Historic Preservation a 2006).

The initial purpose of the Trust was the acquisition and administration of historic sites. Over time, the Trust has expanded its mission to include public outreach. Several demonstration projects were created: the National Main Street Center, which emphasizes preservation as a tool for revitalizing traditional business districts, was established in 1980; Community Partners, which employs a similar approach in historic residential neighborhoods, began in 1994; other special programs have been created to focus on rural preservation (1979), heritage tourism (1989) and statewide organization development (1994) (National Trust for Historic Preservation b 2006).

The National Trust funds its work through its members and the contributions of individuals, corporations, and foundations. Though the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 provided federal funding for the Trust's work, this appropriation was terminated by mutual agreement in 1998. Since then the Trust has relied on private-sector contributions (National Trust for Historic Preservation b 2006).

#### □ **National Main Street Center**

The National Trust Main Street Center is a program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Created in the 1980 it represents the nation's largest full-service commercial district revitalization organization. The Center helped develop the Main Street Four-Point Approach, a comprehensive methodology that has been used by over 1600 communities to revitalize their traditional commercial districts. The approach, which is tailored to meet local needs and opportunities, focuses the work of local staff and volunteers in four key areas:

**Organization:** Building consensus and cooperation among public and private groups and individuals, and identifying sources of funding for revitalization activities. Dane (1988) underscores that this first dimension is the most important one.

**Design:** Enhancing the district's physical appearance through building rehabilitation, compatible new construction, public improvements, and design management systems.

**Promotion:** Marketing the commercial district through events and advertising to attract customers, potential investors, new businesses, residents, and visitors.

**Economic Restructuring:** Strengthening the district's economic base and creating new opportunities through careful analysis and appropriate mixed-use development (National Trust Main Street Center a 2006; Dane 1997).

Fitzgerald (2002) argues that main street revitalization efforts have focused on strengthening the local business through careful analysis of its strengths and weaknesses and adopting a proactive approach to counter loss of business activity. He identifies 3 main components of this approach:

- Market analysis and marketing for business retention and recruitment
- Image and design improvement
- Community building.

As one can easily notice the program is extremely diverse and allows for a lot of flexibility.

The Main Street approach to managing redevelopment in downtown or traditional commercial districts is employed not only by communities that have officially been designated Main Street programs but also by other municipalities that decide to incorporate Main Street standards into their economic development, historic preservation, city management, or urban and community planning programs. Seidman (2005) underscores that within its broad framework, the Main Street program presents itself as a comprehensive strategic framework that can be tailored to the unique local conditions and needs.

The main Street program has continuously evolved during the last three decades; its scope has gradually increased as to serve as many urban communities as possible. The most important stages in the evolution of the program are outlined in the remaining part of this section.

**First demonstration project:** In 1977 as a response to the economic and social trends that were affecting the commercial business districts nationwide, the National Trust for Historic Preservation launched the Main Street Project, a three-year demonstration project designed to study the reasons why so many downtowns were dying, identify the factors affecting downtown's health, and develop a comprehensive revitalization strategy to save historic commercial buildings. Based on a regional competition three pilot communities, ranging in size from 5,000 to 38,000 people, were chosen for the project. These communities were: Galesburg, Ill., Madison, Ind., and Hot Springs, S.D (National Trust Main Street Center b 2006).

This first demonstration program laid the groundwork for the Main Street approach to downtown revitalization. Some of the most significant findings include: the need for a strong public-private partnership, a dedicated organization, a full-time program manager, a commitment to good design, and quality promotional programs; business improvement by a number of measures; preservation/adaptive reuse of unique/historic buildings that are part of the community's heritage (this is important especially in light of the original goal of the Trust, namely historic preservation) (National Trust Main Street Center b 2006).

**Second demonstration project:** As a response to the first demonstration project's success, the Trust established in 1980 the National Main Street Center. With the help of the International Downtown Executives' Association, the Center launched a second demonstration program. Though the framework approach remained constant, important changes were made. The Main Street Center would provide assistance to communities through state Main Street programs, each headed by a state coordinator. This would help states develop networks through which to mobilize resources, share experiences, and transfer lessons to other communities. Second, the communities involved in the second demonstration program would be responsible for hiring their own staff, which would make the local program managers better advocates for their downtowns (National Trust Main Street Center b 2006).

Based on a national competition process, the Main Street Center selected six states to participate in the second demonstration program. The states selected were: Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Texas from the 38 states that applied. In turn, each of the six states chose five towns to serve as its initial Main Street network (National Trust Main Street Center b 2006).

Some of the positive outcomes included: the establishment of new downtown organization; incentive programs directed toward beautification; new business start-ups that provided a solid economic base to support the reuse of each downtown's historic commercial buildings, etc (National Trust Main Street Center b 2006).

**Third demonstration project:** In 1985 the Main Street Center decided to shift its focus and concentrate on cities whose populations exceeded 50,000. Eight cities were chosen to participate in this program. Four programs focused on downtown commercial districts and four centered on neighborhood commercial districts (National Trust Main Street Center b 2006).

Since 1986 the Main Street Center has continuously expanded the scope of its services and programs. Currently the Center claims that there are more than 1,600 communities forming programs in 41 states. As the program matured, the Main Street Center was able to develop strategic partnerships (for example with US Army in order to guide redevelopment of closing army base facilities), to establish citywide programs (San Diego, Chicago, and Boston), and to further the knowledge base/expertise of its members through the provision of publications, a web site, and conferences (National Trust Main Street Center b 2006).

#### □ **A preliminary assessment of Main Street programs**

There is no doubt that the Main Street program has tremendously contributed to the revitalization of small downtowns and the preservation of unique buildings and of a sense of place throughout the entire US. There are numerous case studies that support this argument (see for example the 2006 Great American Main Street Awards available on line at [http://awards.mainstreet.org/MediaLibrary/2006GAMSA\\_AllWinners\\_releases.doc](http://awards.mainstreet.org/MediaLibrary/2006GAMSA_AllWinners_releases.doc)). The Center itself provides numerous statistical data that seem to converge toward the same conclusion. From 1980 to 2002, Main Street communities saw a cumulative net reinvestment of \$17 billion, with an average reinvestment of \$9.5 million in each community. More than 57,000 net new businesses and 231,000 net new jobs have been created, with

the average cost of a job created only \$2,394 (National Trust Main Street Center b 2006). However systematic, independent researches that go beyond individual case studies are almost non-existent. The assessment of the Main Street approach is a challenging task also in light of the diverse local programs implemented under its umbrella. Seidman (2005) reviews existing evaluations of the Main Street program and underscores that the assessment of its performances needs to be conducted in reference to the needs downtowns face. The remaining part of this sections outlines successes and failures of the Main Street program.

### **Successes**

Most of the Main Street's successes are a direct result of the way the program is structured. Seidman (2005) discusses three major advantages Main Street programs have in comparison with other redevelopment strategy. They are: flexibility within a comprehensive strategic framework, emphasis on cumulative incremental change, and heavy reliance on volunteer efforts and local private funding.

The three demonstration projects undertaken by the National Main Street Center focus on a very diverse set of communities ranging from small rural towns to suburban communities to mid-sized cities to urban neighborhoods in large cities such as Pittsburgh, San Antonio, San Diego, etc. Though in each of these settings the four-point approach was implemented, there are nonetheless differences. For example citywide programs focused more on integrating the existing financial incentives and technical assistance for businesses into the Main Street program. In small communities on the other hand more emphasis was placed on small scale redevelopment projects such as façade improvements, preservation of old, traditional buildings, etc. One common feature of all Main Street programs is physical redevelopment via beautification projects. Thus the Main Street program addresses one of the most challenging obstacle downtowns face, namely physical decay. In the case of business districts physical decay is even more daunting because businesses compete with newly built shopping malls that have all the means to be more aesthetically appealing than older businesses in the downtown area.

Main Street's focus on small-scale incremental change represents one of the most important advantages of this revitalization strategy. Communities can get started with fewer resources and less institutional capacity and then built on previous successes and positive experiences as they go. An incremental approach allows urban neighborhoods to structure revitalization efforts as to obtain tangible outcomes quickly. Large redevelopment programs do not yield positive and tangible results immediately; rather they occur on the medium and long term. Numerous scholars suggest that in order to maintain the community's interest and support for these redevelopment efforts some concrete outcomes need to take place in the early stages of the project. This reassures people that things are on the right track and guarantee further support (McBee et al. 1992). Dane (1998) underscores that small neighborhoods are most likely to feel comfortable with the incremental approach undertaken by Main Street programs. Usually these neighborhoods begin with less preexisting capacity and because of a complex mix of stakeholder organizations and the need to include residents it takes longer to organize and find funding for the redevelopment efforts. This is the main reason why Dane argues that small neighborhood like the best the incremental/gradual approach.

Another unique aspect of the program refers to its reliance on volunteers for both project development and implementation work. Seidman (2005) underscores that while many grass root organizations acknowledge the importance of community participation in the development stage of the project (planning and strategic visioning) and in governance, very few rely on volunteers to carry out the implementation of the project. This feature complements the funding mechanism underlying all Main Streets programs and that is geared toward leveraging local private resources. Seidman (2005)

underscores that an important part of Main Street volunteerism is its focus on gaining private-sector participation and funding support, which increase business support to Main Street activities and can bridge the strong commercial or business orientation toward residents. The authors were puzzled in the early stages of their research for this paper by the fact that there was barely any mentioning of the financing mechanisms supporting Main Street programs at the local level. One has to understand though that the usefulness of the projects does not consist in the money it directly provides to communities but rather in the very unique framework that empowers communities to decide for themselves how to structure their revitalization projects based on the four-points approach developed by the National Main Street Center.

Another success of the program is that it created a very complex network of institutional actors that can enter into partnerships, use the network to share/disseminate best practices, and learn from other communities' successes. The National Main Street Center encourages a variety of local grassroots organizations (CDCs) to be part in the redevelopment effort. Also the Center supports the integration of Main Street programs into the existing management process of a downtown or a central business district. The aim of such an approach is to allow Main Street redevelopment efforts to continue once the project is completed. Under the Main Street program communities keep their designation for a limited period of time.

Holland, Michigan is perhaps the best example that Main Street programs can and should be integrated into the long-term management and planning process the municipality undertakes for its downtown and business district. Holland's Downtown Development Authority (DDA) was established in 1978, with Downtown receiving "Main Street" designation in 1984. In 1989 the DDA Board and Main Street Committee merged and adopted the name Main Street/DDA, with a single board guiding Downtown public policies and management. The board has worked toward securing comprehensive public and private support for Downtown revitalization, stressing historic preservation within the context of economic development, striving towards innovation, and pursuing creative ways to plan for Downtown's physical and organizational development. Downtown Holland is seen nationally as one of the most successful Downtown revitalization programs in the country and received a Great American Main Street Award in 1997 (City of Holland 2006). The city also established a Principal Shopping District that is supposed to perform the marketing function for the district. It fits very nicely into the already existing institutional arrangements as DDA and Main Street focus more on physical redevelopment- capital improvements and beautification, while the PSD addresses the need for marketing, promotion, and organization of special events.

The proliferation of district management strategies and various institutional and financial arrangements that support them seems to prove that decision-makers, practitioner, residents, and scholars have started to acknowledge the importance of downtowns and commercial business districts.

### **Failures**

Rucker (2001) explores the issue of whether the Main Street approach is well suited to address the challenges most urban, poor communities currently face. She underscores that Main Street programs need to be assessed in reference to other economic development strategies currently implemented. She identifies two main areas in which the Main Street approach is weak. First, Main Street approach fails to address several important urban problems, including crime, homelessness, the language and cultural barriers faced by minority groups, and gentrification. Traditional Main Street goals focus on historic preservation, maintaining community character, and improving local quality of life, but do not address job creation and social equity that are important in low-income communities. Second, Rucker (2001) identifies urban environmental factors that may pose obstacles to using the Main

Street approach in urban areas, or may require them to use alternate approaches, compared with non-urban areas. The factors include greater cynicism based on past failures, more competition for resources among many local organizations, market competition from other city commercial districts, and an emphasis on larger-scale catalyst projects. Though some of her comments are valid with regard to early Main Street programs, more recent efforts try to focus specifically on inner cores and to address some of the more complex problems they face. It needs to be acknowledged though that one of the main assumptions underlying the Main Street approach is that reinvestment in physical infrastructure (such as façades beautification, preservation of old building) coupled with the retention of small, locally own businesses will spill over into the community and enhance its general well being. While this approach may be useful for areas that are not profoundly impaired by poverty and crime, it may not work in more severely stressed urban communities. Dane's findings (1998) seem to lend support to Rucker's claim that the Main Street approach has a limited impact on the more severe problems downtowns and inner core neighborhoods are confronted with. She found out that economic restructuring was the hardest activity to implement because of the difficulty of recruiting volunteers with appropriate skills, and the need to complete data collection and analysis before defining activities. Consequently, most programs did not begin implementing an economic restructuring agenda until their third year.

Seidman (2005) comments as well on the limited scope of the Main Street approach in reference to inner city problems. He underscores that the approach fails to capitalize on several of the assets downtowns have. The approach it is not concerned with education and workforce development efforts that tap into neighborhood human resources to attract firms and link residents to regional job opportunities. Similarly, its economic focus is primarily on the local retail market rather than on connecting the urban neighborhoods and businesses to the regional economy and growth-oriented industry clusters. One notable exception refers to those Main Street programs that encourage cities/neighborhoods to develop as tourist destinations for the whole region. Holland, Michigan is a good example in this sense as the Tulips Festival, Winter Fest, and other traditional Dutch events draw 2.5 million people per year to Holland (City of Holland, 2006). Finally, because Main Street programs concentrate on soft activities and retailing, they are not well positioned to directly leverage federal programs and other funding sources that are geared to housing, real estate development, and credit availability.

One final limitation of the Main Street approach refers to its exclusive focus on redeveloping commercial properties. Residential redevelopment is not directly addressed. When residential properties happen to be located within the business district, façade improvements and other beautification efforts are directed towards them as well. Other efforts aiming at increasing the residential base within the business district are limited at best. More and more scholars and practitioners acknowledge that retail follows residential. In other words a sound business base cannot be built without the existence of urban residents in close proximity to the downtown. In light of such comments the Main Street approach is limited when there is no residential base and/or regional customers to support business redevelopment.

## **II. Adapting the US Main Street Program to the Romanian urban context**

### **□ The relevance of such an approach for Romania**

Urban planning is still in its infancy in Romania. Scholars and practitioners in this field are often confronted with the need to search for foreign models that might work once they are adapted and implemented in our country. The issue of adapting rather than merely adopting them is critical. The authors claim that the US Main Street Program has the potential to work in the Romanian urban context. There are several reasons that need to be considered with regard to the relevance of such a program in Romania:

**a) The nature and the scope of urban problems.** The assessment of the US Main Street program proves that this approach is successful when downtowns are not confronted with severe, and structural deficiencies such as high unemployment and crime rates, profound physical degradation, massive suburbanization, etc. In the US, downtowns are facing severe problems that cannot be addressed by merely preserving historic buildings, renovating facades, planting flowers and trees, in general by creating a better image for the whole downtown. On the other hand the planning literature acknowledges that European downtowns are not confronted with the same problems their American counterparts face. The factors that have influenced this distinct development of the European downtowns are both cultural and historical (Judd and Kantor, 2002). The Main Street approach is thus more likely to prove efficient in an urban context that is not characterized by the massive decline of the urban cores. This is not to say that there aren't European or Romanian cities that are faced with severe problems – for example the former mining towns or industrial cities whose entire population and development were depending on a single industry. In Romania such examples include cities such as Targu Jiu, Petrosani, Galati, etc. However, in Romania as well as in Europe, the physical and economic decay of urban cores is rather the exception than the rule.

The Main Street approach is also relevant for the Romanian urban context in light of a recent phenomenon, namely the occurrence of urban sprawl. The somewhat increased economic growth currently taking place in Romania is accompanied by uncontrolled and chaotic real estate developments. Leapfrog developments, big-box retailers at the fringe of the city, increased traffic congestion, and pollution, are nowadays an intrinsic part of the daily urban life of many Romanians. Most of the municipalities have not been prepared to properly manage suburban growth and the outcomes associated with it. Many cities and rural communities lack an updated comprehensive plan. Because of a permissible legal framework, weak enforcement of existing regulations, and lack of expertise on the behalf of planners, urban growth is ad-hock, unplanned, and haphazard (Strauss and Neamtu, 2006). This phenomenon that is mainly characteristic for the American cities is becoming a serious threat not just for the Romanian cities but for other European cities as well. In a recent study conducted for Brussels capital region (Sustainable urban management and land use, Prague, 2004) it was argued that if the city is to retain its vitality measures that encourage people to use the downtown for shopping, living, and working should be considered and implemented. The Main Street approach could thus represent an antidote for urban sprawl.

By means of summarizing, the Main Street concept fits the Romanian context because the problems most cities are faced with are not as severe as in the case of US cities. The approach is also relevant in light of urban sprawl that is gradually progressing in scope.

**b) The existence of historic, well established downtowns.** There are numerous cities in Romania that have roots that can be traced back in time many centuries ago. Thus the downtowns have evolved over time as the center of the community, the place where the main cultural, and administrative institutions, shopping destinations, hotels, financial institution, businesses, etc are located. The Main Street program can build on this preexistent identity. It is well known that nowadays cities are looking for developing specific city brands. This concept of brand as applied to a city is intended to enhance the city's visibility therefore making it more attractive for residents, tourists, and businesses. The program can be seen as a way to create a specific brand for the city. In this case the brand would integrate the historic and cultural traditions that already exist.

There is a growing body of literature on city branding that proves the importance of such a process. As one scholar argues "Imagine Paris without its Eiffel Tower. Can it be identified as Paris then? A brand is such a powerful thing that a photograph of Paris in the 24<sup>th</sup> century in the science fiction television serial, "Star Trek" included the Eiffel Tower in spite of its futuristic buildings (Taylor and Cheng, 2006). A brand stands for a certain personality; it evokes certain feelings, builds goodwill

and carries emotional attachments” (Low, 2005 cited in Taylor and Cheng, 2006). Other scholars argue that a city needs to differentiate itself from its competitors. The city brand builds on the city’s character, and the city brand too needs to do that better than anything else (Bedbury and Fenichell, 2005 cited in Taylor and Cheng, 2006). The city of Cluj-Napoca, Romania, for example, could built its specific brand based on the preservation of historic buildings in the downtown thus evoking its cultural importance as the heart of Transylvania while in the same time it could also capitalize on its imagine of a university city. It is clear that the former goal can be better accomplished by using the Main Street approach while the latter needs to be developed by using different programs.

**c) A growing momentum for urban development.** As mentioned before urban planning is still in its infancy. Numerous cities have started in the recent years to develop comprehensive/master plans for the entire city. Urban problems tend to be considered within the broader context of local economic development. There is a growing preoccupation for the (re) redevelopment of the downtowns. Cities such as Cluj-Napoca, Sibiu, Timisoara, Oradea have strategies that target the redevelopment of the urban core. The accent is placed however on creating car free and pedestrian friendly downtowns, on planting trees and flowers, and on enhancing the physical appearance by adding exterior furniture and public art. Historic preservation is not an explicit goal. In cities where preservation measures have been initiated and financed by city halls the driving force behind these preservation efforts seems to be the necessity of helping landlords to keep their historic properties up to reasonable standards than the realization of the importance historic preservation can have on creating a brand or an identity for the city. A Main Street program could build on this momentum and interest for urban development and incorporate historic preservation as an important goal to redeveloping downtowns.

**d)** It has to be acknowledged that there are certain cities in Romania that would fit best under this approach. A prerequisite for the implementation of a Main Street program is for each city or town to undertake an assessment (diagnose) with regard to the scope and nature of the problems the downtowns are confronted with. The authors argue that **the Main Street approach would fit best cities that meet the following prerequisite:** (a) medium or large size, highly urbanized, (b) low unemployment rates, (c) a strong and diverse business sector and a strong non-profit sector, and (d) an existing downtown that is not experiencing massive loss of businesses/residents. Once the program is established it could be expanded to other cities/areas that do not meet these requirements.

#### □ **Challenges and limitations**

Significant differences between the American and Romanian culture and governmental systems account for some of the challenges with regard to the implementation of the American Main Street Program in Romania. The main differences refer to the powers of different levels of government, stronger grassroots initiatives in the U.S., and a more significant role of the nonprofit organizations nationwide in redevelopment efforts across the U.S. than in Romania. Also, American nonprofit organizations have access to a larger variety of private funds (donations) along with public funds than their Romanian counterparts.

Therefore, an important challenge for the creation and implementation of a Main Street program in Romania would be to identify and develop the two main components the American Main Street Program relies on: a well-known nonprofit organization – the National Trust for Historic Preservation and grassroots initiatives. Due to these challenges, efforts to implement the program in Romania must be classified into two broad categories: short-term recommendations and long-term efforts. Therefore, a long-term goal would be to create a decentralized approach to the program.

The creation and development of an organization similar to the National Trust for Historic Preservation in Romania that would be able to lend its prestige and ‘brand’ to the program is a long-term objective requiring a growing preservation movement in Romania that would recognize the

importance of historic sites and buildings. This is challenging because grassroots movements are still incipient in Romania. Funds are limited and usually large infrastructure projects and other economic development programs are favored in detriment to historic preservation initiatives. The Romanian Ministry of Culture and Cults is the governmental body responsible for the coordination and creation of national policies regarding the preservation/protection of significant historic sites/monuments (<http://www.cultura.ro/Index.aspx>). Currently, there are numerous small nonprofit organizations whose main purpose is culture and preservation of specific monuments or sites (<http://www.cultura.ro/ongsearch.aspx>). However, there is no dominant nongovernmental organization visible on the national arena focused on historic preservation. It can be argued that there is little emphasis and interest in the historic buildings and places with less historic importance and little awareness of the role these buildings have in shaping the character of Romanian communities.

However, several initiatives are necessary to achieve a more decentralized approach. Therefore, on the short term the measures involve a more centralized approach than in the U.S. to create and encourage historic preservation. In this case, the national government through the Ministry of Public Administration and Ministry of Culture and Cults may develop a historic preservation program.

The national program would mainly allocate funds to local governments for the revitalization of commercial streets. The funds will be provided for initiatives that aim at enhancing the physical appearance of the downtown, for building rehabilitation, and improvements. The long-term objectives of this program would be to develop the context for decentralized initiatives and to develop local networks of key actors, partnerships, and practices that can then develop preservation initiatives on a continuous basis without the intervention of the national government. Development of local strategic partnerships, building consensus and cooperation among different actors is extremely important for the success of the Main Street program in Romania.

The program can provide for the creation of technical advising centers in each city/county that would provide technical assistance and funds for these projects. Depending on the level of expertise at local level these services can be provided by nonprofit organizations, county and local governments, or in partnership. The county government (or a nonprofit organization at the county level) may coordinate the local centers and act as an intermediary between the national government and local jurisdictions (provide funds).

In the current context, the role of a local center is critical in that it would have to provide technical assistance such as: information about creating a nonprofit organization, helping the group identifying the local assets and key issues/needs and it would encourage local initiatives by building consensus, and identifying key actors. Also, the center would help the organization to develop the mission statement (Fitzgerald, 2002) and to create an implementation action act. A big challenge is to create the local downtown organization (merchants' association) and to make businesses work together (not to compete against each other) because strong grassroots support is important to the retail revitalization strategy (Fitzgerald, 2002).

Funding is an important aspect and major concern due to limited local and national budgetary resources. However, funds from the national budget are vital on the short term. Money would be allocated from the national government on a competitive basis. In the U.S. funds are raised from donations, where in Romania there are little funds raised from private sources.

As argued before, the Main Street program does not represent a panacea for all the ills downtowns and commercial districts are confronted with. Because of limited focus and power, other governmental programs targeting redevelopment should be intensified, such as technical and financial assistance for small and medium size businesses. The local governments can become increasingly engaged in the revitalization of downtown and traditional commercial centers through several measures. The local government can act as a facilitator by enacting design standards for the central area of the city.

The city can provide economic incentives (tax breaks, grants for physical rehabilitation of buildings, supplies – free paint). Also, the city can develop programs to reduce the visual blight of the area by rehabilitating sidewalks, crosswalks, planting flowers, benches in partnership with local business owners (Fitzgerald, 2002). Current local initiatives can be expanded to incorporate the principles of the Main Street program. For example, a countywide contest that awards the most beautiful downtown title can become a tool for encouraging more preservation and revitalization (along with more stimulating rewards). Also region-wide similar approaches can be developed awarding small and medium size cities for their historic preservation efforts.

□ **An implementation framework for the Romanian Main Street Program**

The US Main Street Program developed over time from a centralized, governmentally funded initiative to a decentralized approach, financed from private and business donations that allows for innovation, flexibility, and integration of the main street philosophy into the local redevelopment efforts/agendas. Several steps need to be undertaken in Romania as well in order to create and implement a Main Street program. The following matrix includes several of the steps that the authors consider as critical toward the development of such a program.

The matrix has three dimensions:

- a) **Time frame** – it refers to the time frame that needs to be taken into consideration for the implementation of that stage and for accomplishing the goals underlying each stage.
  - Short-term** – up to 2 year
  - Medium-term** – 3 to 5 years
  - Long-term** – 5 to 15 years
- b) **Organizations** – it specifies the organizations that need to get involved in the process of creating and implementing the Main Street program in Romania; a distinction is made among public authorities, non-profits and grassroots organizations, and businesses
- c) **Challenges** – it highlights the obstacles that can be encountered during the drafting and implementation of a Main Street program.
  - Low** – it doesn't significantly challenge the status quo; does not require actors to assume new roles; does not require significant financial resources and changes in the legal framework.
  - Medium** – it involves changes in the status quo, however all the key actors would perceive them as normal or as a result of evolution and reform involved in the process.
  - High** – it implies significant changes; it requires the creation of new organizations that have not traditionally existed at the national and local level; it requires actors to assume new roles.

	<b>Steps/Activities</b>	<b>Time frame</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Challenges</b>
<b>1</b>	Create the <b>National Historic Preservation Program</b> (centralized, top-down approach)	Short term	Ministry of Public Administration and Ministry of Culture and Cults (Adopt legislation)	<b>Medium</b> Lack of a governmental strategy in this field Low interest at the national level in this issue Low pressure from the civil society Other priorities that necessitate governmental funding Lack of expertise
<b>2</b>	Implement the program at the local level (start stimulate the involvement of local authorities)	Medium term	Local governments Local departments specialized in this field (Provide local governments with incentives to apply for national grants under the Main Street program and create specialized departments that would handle these initiatives)	<b>Medium</b> Lack of expertise in this field within local governments Not a traditional role/mission for local governments to undertake Limited national funds/need to apply and enter into a competition with other communities for funding
<b>3</b>	Create <b>Technical Advising Centers</b> in each community	Medium term	Nonprofit organizations, local governments, or in partnerships	<b>High</b> Local government departments need to act as a facilitator between the national government and the local community (both residents and businesses); not a traditional role; lack of people trained to perform such a job Once such a center is created a high challenge is to make it become self-sustainable (in terms of both financing and personnel) Skepticism on the behalf of all the actors involved – just one more organization that needs to be created in order to deal with priorities imposed by the
<b>5</b>	<b>Identify key actors:</b> business owners, property owners area	Medium term	Local Technical Advising Centers, Chamber of Commerce, Local grassroots organizations Business associations	<b>High</b> <b>No grassroots organizations that are focused on this mission of historic preservation</b> Companies are not good corporate citizens – no interest in funding community projects; Lack of understanding on the behalf of businesses with regard to how such programs could help them retain their customers Limited skills of the local center personnel

6	<p><b>Create the local downtown organization</b> (merchants' associations)</p>	<p>Medium to long term</p>	<p>Local center</p>	<p><b>High</b>  Competition among businesses/Reluctance to work together  Lack of knowledge – no understanding of how a Main Street program could enhance business' and customers' retention in the downtown  Lack of a local vision/theme  Delays in creating the organization (identifying leaders, funds, legal provisions)</p>
7	<p><b>Encourage local initiatives</b>  Assistance programs that would help to the development of local skills in the field of historic preservation  Enact design standards for the local downtown  Fund small historic preservation initiatives</p>	<p>Medium to long term</p>	<p>Local center  Local government</p>	<p><b>Medium</b>  Need to secure access to national funding  Limited ability at the local level to access other funds except from the national grants  Lack of a coherent vision, action plans  Limited expertise from local center  Lack of recognized local leaders of the local main street organization  Prioritization of investments (historic preservation vs. economic development)</p>
8	<p><b>Encourage historic preservation initiatives:</b> Countywide/region-wide Beautification Contest Programs</p>	<p>Each year (after the local centers are established)</p>	<p>County government  Regional development agencies,  Ministry of Culture and Cults</p>	<p><b>Low</b>  Interests in this issue on the behalf of local authorities  Limited funds/available personnel  Limited financial awards – therefore not an incentive for communities and residents to participate  Limited marketing</p>
10	<p><b>Create a national nonprofit organization</b> similar to the National Trust for Historic Preservation</p>	<p>Long term</p>	<p>National government</p>	<p><b>High</b>  Lack of momentum for historic preservation; no strong national preservation movement  Consensus among political parties to support the adoption of a law in this field  Know-how regarding the transfer of prerogatives from governmental authorities to the newly created NGO  Limited trust in NGOs  Limited private financial sources for NGOs</p>
11	<p><b>Decentralize the Main Street Program</b></p>	<p>Long term</p>	<p>National NGO, Local Centers</p>	<p><b>High</b>  Need to have strong local centers in order to be able to decentralize the program  Diversification may be a challenge associated to decentralization – how to make the program work in other contexts (rural communities or small, declining towns  Limited money from donations for nonprofit organizations</p>

### III. Conclusion

American inner cities and their central business districts (CBDs) have experienced enormous decline in the post World War II. Strategies that focus on the redevelopment of a specific area within a city – the so-called district management strategies as - seek to address the overall management of a business district in order to improve its ability to compete with shopping malls in attracting shoppers, businesses, and investment. The US Main Street Program is both an instrument and a philosophy. As a philosophy it tries to encourage the redevelopment of the downtown as the center of a community, the place around which the whole cultural and economic identity of a community gravitates. As an instrument, the program has been developed over the years under the umbrella of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The program proved successful in mobilizing the relevant actors within urban communities to get together and work towards the enhancement of the community's downtown.

The approach is relevant within the Romanian urban context because of three main reasons: the nature and scope of urban problems (the downtown are still the center of the community and does not normally experiences significant physical or economic decay); the existence of historic, well established downtowns, and a growing momentum for urban development (within the broader context of local development numerous municipalities are currently in the process of drafting and adopting a comprehensive plan or an urban development strategy). Based on the assessment of both the American Main Street program and of the Romanian urban context the authors argue that the program could be implemented in those Romanian cities/towns that meet the following requirements: (a) medium or large size, highly urbanized, (b) low unemployment rates, (c) a strong and diverse business sector and a strong non-profit sector, and (d) an existing downtown that is not experiencing massive loss of businesses/residents. Once the program is established it could be expanded to other cities/areas that do not meet these requirements. The main challenges in developing a Romania Main Street program would be: a weak preservation movement; no interest in this issue among NGOs and civil society; no major NGO that could assume the role played in the US by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The most difficult might prove to create over time a decentralize approach to managing and funding this program. This is mainly due to a limited interest and know-how with regard to historic preservation and downtown redevelopment on the behalf of all the stakeholders involved. Despite these limitations the Main Street approach remains a viable and powerful tool to be used by municipalities and communities in order to prevent the decline of their urban cores, to create an identity for the city based on the downtown, and to counteract the negative effects associated with urban sprawl.

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