



For those who remember Middletown as one of New England's ailing small cities, Main Street has a big surprise.

# MAIN STREET'S NEW BUZZ MAIN STREET'S NEW BUZZ MAIN ST

BY CYNTHIA ROCKWELL PHOTOGRAPHY BY BILL BURKHART

## On a bright early-autumn Saturday

afternoon, pedestrians fill the central block of Main Street, which has been closed to vehicles for "Middletown Dances." A dance team from Middletown High School teaches "Hand Jive" on a temporary stage near Court Street. Onlookers young and old, of various ethnicities, follow along. Some festival-goers duck into one or another of the street's numerous restaurants for a quick bite. Others sip coffee from one of several sidewalk cafés as they watch events unfold at locations up and down the street.

Admittedly, this is not a typical day in the life of the city. However, if you walk downtown on most weekdays at lunchtime, you will see motorists pounce on

the rare curbside parking spot. Diners arriving at a restaurant even 15 minutes past noon are apt to find booths already filled.

Alumni may be surprised to find a four-star hotel on Main Street in the old Armory building across from the South Green, a multiplex cinema occupying the site of an abandoned supermarket in Metro Square, and a police station in the heart of the business district, where Sears once stood before fleeing to a nearby mall.

A quick jaunt along Main Street, starting from O'Rourke's Diner at its most northerly point down to the new inn, indicates that Middletown's ethnic flavor is no longer solely Sicilian. Three storefronts claim nearly a full block for Tibetan antiques and cui-

sine. Signs to "Haiti's Back Porch," "Forbidden City," "Datura," and "Osaka" herald a new era in Middletown, a city that the November 2005 issue of *Yankee* magazine described as a "multinational community that is transcending boundaries."

"Middletown is definitely getting buzz," says Shana Uthgenannt, owner of Moxie, a store offering both vintage and trendy clothing, and a shopkeeper recently relocated from the upscale suburb of West Hartford. Main Street, Middletown, with its decreasing storefront vacancy rate (only two retail spaces were available in January, and both had received offers) is becoming more frequently—and optimistically—compared to that wealthier, pedestrian-friendly downtown to its north.





Middletown’s latest economic development report notes that Middlesex County has surpassed Fairfield County (nicknamed the “Gold Coast”) in its median household income of \$61,770. The median income in Middletown itself is somewhat lower, but the message is clear: Middletown exists in an upscale environment.

“But if you step just one block off Main Street, you can’t talk about Fairfield or West Hartford,” cautions William Warner, Middletown’s director of planning and development since 1989. “In the North End, the median income is \$13,000 for a family of four. This is comparable to the poverty you find in Connecticut’s largest cities—in Bridgeport, New Haven, and Hartford.”

Warner’s arrival in mid-1989 coincided with a downturn that took the city to a low ebb. Stores and businesses closed one after another, leaving Main Street with a vacancy rate of more than 60 percent. The downturn was attributable in large part to social trends that were working against every Main Street, U.S.A. Homebuyers were headed to the suburbs, as many social commentators observed, and shoppers were headed to the mall. Add the appearance of crack cocaine and the AIDS epidemic before protease inhibitors, and you have cities in a death spiral.

In Middletown, deinstitutionalization at Connecticut Valley Hospital, arguably a meritorious goal but flawed in practice, dumped psychiatric patients onto Main Street with few resources. The pedestrian population of this era seemed to lean more heavily toward loiterers than shoppers.

Against these trends, Middletown’s Main Street has staged a remarkable recovery over the past two decades, with Wesleyan as a key player.

University Vice President Peter Patton recalls the day in 1995 when the university’s trustees and the presidential search committee gathered on the steps of North College to announce they had selected Douglas J. Bennet Jr. ’59 as Wesleyan’s next president.

“It was a carefully scripted event,” Patton recalls, “when straight through the crowd strode a man in a business suit, right up to the microphone to speak. This wasn’t on the agenda. The board members were looking at me and mouthing, ‘Who is this guy?’”

That guy was Middletown’s mayor, Tom Serra, and his entrance into Wesleyan’s celebration underscored the commingling of town and gown in ways unexpected and heretofore just not done.

“Bennet’s political background in the state [Douglas J. Bennet Sr. ’33, was active in both state and local government] led him to want to partner with the city—and to understand how it must be done,” Patton says. He calls Wesleyan’s motive in revitalizing the decaying downtown, “enlightened self-interest.”

The city had applied for, and received, a “Connecticut Main Street” designation, with support for redevelopment. Tom Serra’s successor, former Mayor Maria Holzberg, approached Wesleyan, Middlesex Hospital, and five corporations in the city. She told them that she

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needed \$10,000 a year from each for three years. That was \$70,000 a year, a downtown manager’s salary for three years. With that, the city had one person whose sole focus was to attract new businesses and improve the appearance of Middletown’s downtown area.

While Bennet’s arrival may have sparked synergy, Patton emphasizes that the Middletown-Wesleyan relationship had long been active, as alumni of any era will attest. “Wesleyan people were always participating in the life of Middletown: volunteering, tutoring, serving on boards and committees, heading organizations,” he

says. As a geology professor, Patton has served on the town’s Inland Wetlands Commission.

“The difference now,” he notes, “is that our participation is more organized and deliberate.” The city is also deliberate in its inclusion of Wesleyan. “A college town on the banks of the Connecticut River” is the guiding principle in redevelopment, says planning director Warner.

The city enlisted Wesleyan’s support in bringing a hotel to Main Street. In 1994 a consultant had declared this aim utterly unviable. Only five years later the same consultant, amazed by the downtown’s turnaround, reached an entirely different conclusion: the city could support a hotel of more than 100 rooms. Wesleyan, along with the city, four banks, and private investors, stepped in with financing. Now, parents and alumni have a hotel that includes a restaurant and spa amenities, a mere five-minute walk from campus.

These visitors step out onto a street lined with restaurants of all varieties: from O’Rourke’s Diner in the North End (offering fare written up in *Gourmet*), to the newest addition, Osaka (a Japanese hibachi restaurant) which occupies a shuttered Burger King space. Destinta, a 12-screen multiplex, is right around the corner.

“Middletown seems to have become a dinner-and-entertainment venue,” says Warner. “People come for dinner and then go to a movie at Destinta, or to an event at the Wesleyan Center for the Arts.”

In 2003, the university created the Center for Community Partnerships (CCP). Housed in the building that many may remember as *Argus* headquarters (on the corner of Church and High streets), the center encompasses programs in community service, community relations, and service learning. It also provides a clear point of entry to community members who seek engagement with the university.

Lydia Brewster, community organizer with the grassroots North End Action Team (NEAT) on Main Street, describes the CCP as “one of the most exciting things that has happened at Wesleyan. We now have a dialogue about university and community needs and about how they can be mutually supported.”

Rob Rosenthal, professor of sociology and a community activist, is the director of the CCP. He offers a service-learning course in community research methods. Juniors and seniors work with local community agencies to design and carry out social research projects, gaining course-credit in sociology. Other service-learning courses



give credit in psychology, E&ES, dance, less-commonly taught languages, biology, and music.

“The university has been great in terms of not only wanting to strengthen the community, but doing it in the way that the community wants,” says Rosenthal. “Wesleyan has been supportive but never dictatorial. It has always asked the residents, ‘What do you want?’ and then supported that goal.”

The creation of the Green Street Arts Center is an example of this process: the community defined what it wanted in a neighborhood center. Ongoing Wesleyan involvement is vital to its programming, with 50 Wesleyan students per semester acting as tutors and mentors in the after-school hours.

“I’m not sure people understand how important this arts center is to the community,” Rosenthal says. “It provides visible Wesleyan support to the North End and to the new housing initiative. It reassures landlords and investors that Wesleyan will continue to support the community, so they shouldn’t disinvest.”

The housing initiative is a hot-button issue. Last year the city selected a for-profit developer, the Richman Group, to develop 96 units of housing. While Rosenthal had concerns about the design—“I would have preferred smaller buildings, more integrated with home ownership”—he acknowledged that “these are the realities of making it profitable.

“Some have challenged the aesthetics of the housing—but if you have seen the current living conditions in those buildings, you have to understand the city’s decision to expedite this.”

NEAT’s Brewster also is passionate about housing in the North End. “We need a vibrant group of people who enjoy urban life,” she says. “We need a stable core of residents; we need familiar eyes on the street.” She faults absentee ownership, coupled with a lax code-enforcement policy, as important factors in the initial disintegration of the neighborhood. Once absentee landlords understood that no one was paying attention to the neighborhood, drugs crept in. One of the principles of urban design, she explains, is that the quality of life improves as the number of residents increase.

Housing on Rapallo Avenue, on Ferry Street, and on Green Street, says Rosenthal, is a key component of the larger picture: “You can’t save Main Street unless you attend to problems in the North End.”

City planner Warner concurs. “When you start to say you want to revitalize, but you ignore a pocket of poverty, it’s a powder keg; you have to do something. We’ll now have 96 units of housing. The majority—66 units—will be offered to people making 60 percent of the median income, or \$47,000. This will triple the income of the neighborhood and help to stabilize it.”

Nineteen units will be offered as subsidized housing to current residents who would like to remain. Additionally, the developer has included a 24-hour-a-day on-site manager.

While housing is crucial to a turnaround, it’s never sufficient by itself, Warner cautions. New jobs are key, and topnotch technology attracts businesses.

Ganesan Ravishanker, director of technology support services at Wesleyan, recalls being invited to join the 10-

member Middletown Technology Group. The purpose was simple: expedite broadband installation on Main Street. After meeting that goal, Ravishanker recalls, “one member started saying, ‘What about wireless?’ so we looked at what other cities were doing.”

The group located three sites where the technology might be installed to give complete coverage throughout Main Street’s business district. A networking company agreed to donate the wireless connection, and the university paid for a wiring contractor. At the grand opening last February, WiFi officially arrived. “We walked with a laptop from one end of the business district to the other,” he says.

As eager as Middletown was to invite business into town, not all businesses were welcome. Rezoning, another crucial element to revitalization, was part of the “Main Street” designation, and required that buildings offer retail frontage, rather than storefront office space. Pedestrian traffic is key: People don’t stroll along to check out the window of a brokerage office; they will, however, be lured by a window full of shiny bicycles or mannequins in the latest fashions.

One facility—the new centrally located police station, which shares its building with the popular First and Last Tavern—is also a key element in the revitalization. A powerful statement of the city’s concern for safety, its door opens directly onto Main Street, providing those all-important “eyes on the street” that Brewster longs for in the North End.

Perhaps, though, Warner muses, Middletown’s revitalization was possible because “it never really died.”



## VARIETY ON MAIN STREET

**A GOURMET DINER:** Where else but O'Rourke's? 728 Main St., 860/852-0080. Brian O'Rourke is the owner and chef; he makes everything on premises from fresh ingredients, including daily specialty breads and soups.

**THE BEST CUCUMBER MARTINI:** Luce's, 98 Washington St., 860/344-0222. "A beautiful selection of beef, 130 wines, and 18 beers on tap," boasts New York restaurateur and owner Sammy Bajraktarevic. The fare is "modern American with an Italian flair."

**THE STATE'S TOP VEGETARIAN RESTAURANT:** It's Only Natural, 386 Main St., in Main Street Market; 860/346-9210. Those who remember the funky little corner of the food co-op will be awed by the vegetarian nouvelle cuisine and wine list. Leave room for a slice of vegan "teasecake."

**A TOTAL IMMERSION EXPERIENCE:** Little Tibet: 680 Main St., 860/343-9500. Owner Bhumba Drok-Sang offers two shops filled with Tibetan treasures, including rugs, handpainted furniture, and antiques. Between them, the restaurant's authentic cuisine completes the cultural experience.

**"FROM MOD TO MODERN":** That's the slogan for Moxie, 466 Main Street, 860/638-0030. Owner Shana Uthgenannt offers an eclectic collection of vintage and hip clothing and accessories—great funky jewelry, sunglasses, belts, and hats.

**CONNECTICUT'S BEST HOBBY STORE:** Amato's Toy and Hobby, 395 Main Street, 860/347-1893. A must-see for the model-train aficionado. With 9,000 square feet, this family business, open since 1940, boasts the state's best selection of model trains.

**FLORAL DESIGN AS SCULPTURE:** Datura: A Modern Garden, 386 Main Street, 860/346-8031. Graphic artist and florist Tony Palmieri says the wildly ornate handpainted sign that a friend created for him has shaped his shop. He also carries porcelain dolls (made by his aunt), tarot cards, and glass "witch balls," along with wizard hats and moss orbs.



With cheerful irony she describes her background as "a major in medieval Icelandic poetry at Wesleyan," but that did not stop her from writing grant applications. Kidcity received its first grant in 1995; they started building the first exhibit in 1998 and opened its doors nine months later. Among other initial offerings, it featured a music room, complete with gamelan. Five years later the museum has more than doubled in size. Scott Kessel '88 is the artist—painter, sculptor, and builder—where "tries to create what Jennifer has in her head."

Her commitment to Kidcity stems from a larger goal: "I want to make it hard for people to move away from Middletown." Soon after her first child was born, it seemed that all young parents with whom she and her husband had become friendly were moving away to "cool places, like Seattle." She wanted to turn Middletown into a cool place by making sure it has unique offerings that are hard to leave. "Like Middlesex Fruiterie," she says. "On paper, it sounds like a terrible business plan: a fruit store where no one is allowed to touch the fruit. But it's wonderful. They have the best fruit—Mary and Ted [Xenelis] take good care of everyone. And if people are thinking of moving out of the area, they stop and think to themselves, 'But where will I get my fruit?'"

Alexander, her husband Mark Masselli, and Amato have, in their commitment to Main Street, created another draw downtown: Vinnie's Jump and Jive, a storefront dance studio. Soon after installation of a sprung wood floor, swing-dance enthusiasts were driving from around the region for the monthly lesson-and-dance nights.

Another Wesleyan alumna, Susan Allison '85, offers an arts venue on Main Street: The Buttonwood Tree occupies the first floor of the former Arriwani Hotel. Secondhand

books invite readers, young and old, a chessboard beckons hands to play out the mind's strategy, and a performance area allows voices to find their audience. Allison recalls that when she first opened there, she'd see drug deals in progress, right outside her window. "I'd tap on the window and say, 'Excuse me! You can't do that here!'" Her vigilance prevailed, and The Buttonwood now serves as an element of stability in the North End.

A little farther north and on the other side, the Tibetan enclave, three storefronts and a restaurant owned by Tibetan native Bhumba Drok-Sang, serves as another base of stability in the North End. Occupying one storefront where the healthfood co-op and It's Only Natural used to stand, the enclave's ornately painted furniture and handwoven rugs draw shoppers from Essex and Chester, wealthier shoreline communities, as well as from New York. The Tibetan restaurant sits conveniently between the two stores. "He's created an experience," says Warner.

Drok-Sang considers the university one of the city's greatest strengths. With its courses in Tibetan Buddhism and interest in world cultures, it is a community that fosters an eager interest in his cuisine and wares. "Wesleyan is Middletown's biggest customer," he points out. Drok-Sang, however, is not entirely happy with his site, as he looks toward his further growth. "We need more downtown parking space," he explains.

This issue also is a concern for Warner, who points out that the city has just been awarded \$18 million in federal transportation funds to address the parking—and transportation—situation. Downtown Business District director Marie Kalita-Leary notes that the city has added more and larger signs to point visitors toward parking lots. It

is a problem, she agrees, but all in all, it's a good one to have, especially since the city has received the funds to help solve it.

Meanwhile, It's Only Natural and the natural food store have moved down the street to a central location. "The North End is a sort of incubator for new businesses," Warner offers. With its lower rent, small businesses can afford to start off at that end of the street and then move south as they become more prosperous.


That's what Datura did, a florist shop in the central business district with a wild, lushly painted sign that draws in customers. Tony Palmieri bought the floral business known as Howarth's. When a storefront in the central district became vacant, he took it, eventually changing the name to Datura: A Modern Garden.

Another new look on Main Street is Irreplaceable Artifacts, in the storefront where some may remember a five-and-ten. Now giant stone lions, a complete paneled room, or a circular stairway turned on its side entice passersbys in for a second look. Elizabeth Wolff '06 manages the shop when owner Evan Blum is at the sister-store, Demolition Depot, in New York City, where the space to showcase entire rooms comes with a premium price tag.

"People come from all over, from New York City, to go to antique stores," says Sammy Bajraktarevic, owner of Luce's restaurant. He knows, because they come to his restaurant next, possibly sipping a cucumber martini before they settle down for a New-York-style steak. It's where Jennifer Alexander suggests we meet for lunch, right next to her home, when we talk about Middletown. A vegetarian ravioli on the menu as a special is her choice.

Later, when we view Kessel's work in Kidcity, David Vitale-Wolff '06 is there, babysitting Kessel's young son. Vitale-Wolff expresses surprise that so many Wesleyan students stay in town—and pleasure. He is considering doing the same.

He met more Middletown residents, including Kessel, when he became active in the Long Lane community garden, which produces food for each gardener and also donates produce to the city's soup kitchen. Middletown was actually part of why he chose Wesleyan.

"When I was looking at colleges, I went out to see Pomona," he recalls, "and I liked it, but it was really in a college town. Everything was the college. Then I visited Wesleyan, and I saw it was in a real town. That's what I wanted. I wanted to live in a real town." 

**SHOPPING WELL AND DOING GOOD:** Haiti's Back Porch, 100 Riverview Center, 860/344-9547. Offering handmade items purchased directly from island artisans and collectives, the nonprofit store supports orphanages, medical clinics, and other community programs.

**THE MOST SAVORY "STORM":** Typhoon: 344 Main St., 860/344-9667. Traditional East Asian cooking. BYOB. Their bowls of steaming noodles will comfort any weary traveler—or stressed-out student.

**"FORBIDDEN" — A "MUST-GO":** Forbidden City, 335 Main St., 860/343-8288. It is not only a sleek and upscale Chinese restaurant, but also an art gallery. It's a feast for the eyes and palate.

**THE ONLY FRUIT STORE YOU'LL EVER NEED:** Middlesex Fruiterie, 191 Main St., Middletown, 860/346-4372. One visit will show you why customers come from several towns away. Gourmet items fill the shelves above the produce and fruit baskets are a specialty. Newbies, please note: Don't touch. Ted or Mary Xenelis will choose their best for you.

**BEST KIDS' MUSEUM IN THE STATE:** Kidcity, 119 Washington St., 860/347-0495. Founded by



Jennifer Alexander '88, the museum offers children 1–8 (and their accompanying adult) a great place to use their imaginations in play, as they explore the hands-on exhibits.

**RECLAIMING THE PAST:** Irreplaceable Artifacts, 428 Main Street, 860/344-8576. Wander through Evan Blum's store and go back in time. See the bar from P.T. Barnum's house, or that from Sugar Ray Robinson's in the Bronx, gas lights from a Packard dealership, laundry sinks from a Park Avenue mansion, or a New York socialite's paneled living room. Elizabeth Wolff '06, a double-major in English and U.S. history ("with a particular interest in material history and the history of consumption"), takes care of the shop when Blum is at his New York location.