

## Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW  
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Isenberg, Alison. *downtown America: A History of the Place and the People Who Made It*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004. xviii + 441 pages. Photographs, maps, notes, index. ISBN (cloth): 0-226-38507-8

Donica Belisle

Volume 34, numéro 1, fall 2005

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1016052ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016052ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

### ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer ce compte rendu

Belisle, D. (2005). Compte rendu de [Isenberg, Alison. *downtown America: A History of the Place and the People Who Made It*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004. xviii + 441 pages. Photographs, maps, notes, index. ISBN (cloth): 0-226-38507-8]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 34(1), 115–116. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016052ar>

## Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

**Isenberg, Alison. *downtown America: A History of the Place and the People Who Made It*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004. xviii + 441 pages. Photographs, maps, notes, index. ISBN (cloth): 0-226-38507-8.**

Exploring the history of Main Street in 20th-century America, Alison Isenberg offers a well-documented look at the meanings Americans have attached to their downtowns. She makes three arguments: Americans have viewed downtowns as sites of civic participation, Main Street's history is one of exclusions, and the current narrative of decline governing downtown development is unproductive.

Led by male urban planners but sustained by women's groups, in the late 19th century a City Beautiful movement swept across the US. Contending that Main Street was a "special American public space," proponents wanted to unite "business interests and the public good" (12). Known as "municipal housekeepers," female supporters linked civic participation to urban beautification; their actions included raising money for lamps and garbage cans, scrubbing sidewalks, planting gardens, and pressuring government and business to keep Main Street tidy. Although they wanted to heighten moral standards, their visions were exclusionary. Most re-made downtowns according to bourgeois ideals, and many wanted to ban street vendors. Those who sold wares on the street were overwhelmingly foreign-born; in calling for their removal municipal housekeepers' civic vision enhanced some people's entitlements but marginalized others.'

By the 1920s city governments, trade associations, and investors had adopted some City Beautiful ideas. A welcoming downtown, they felt, was necessary to lure middle-class, white female shoppers. While blacks lived near Main Street and patronized its shops, and while single white women worked downtown daily, investors believed that land values depended on purse-wielding housewives. They began to "zone" districts according to use; pure retail zones were the most valuable. Investors also illegally zoned according to race, for they believed that blacks depreciated land values.

The Great Depression and World War II forced investors to rethink value. They adopted a "recycling and reuse" (165) model that took its cue from economic conditions. Yet when the economy rebounded in the fifties they again looked to white middle-class female shoppers. Blaming suburban stores for drawing off prime customers, and blaming feminism for encouraging women to enter the workforce and to spend less time shopping, investors clung to the notion that white moneyed homemakers held the keys to prosperity. In their scramble to attract such customers, they ignored the blacks, increasing numbers of immigrants, and elderly people who dwelled and shopped downtown.

In the 1960s investors faced the consequences of these visions. Black civil rights' activists marched through downtowns, held sit-ins in downtown stores and restaurants, and urged

boycotts of white-owned businesses. They chose their sites of protest wisely: if downtown retail districts were areas of civic participation, then blacks' relative ability to move about in downtown spaces symbolized their relative civic entitlements. Even more than civil rights' actions, urban riots, and especially the burning of buildings and the looting of stores, challenged investors' views.

After the riots abated, investors tried to rebuild. Through the 1970s standardization and modernity held sway in development, especially in downtown mall construction. In the 1980s developers realized the profitable potential of nostalgia and began building historically-themed marketplaces, shopping districts, and festivals. The latter were, and continue to be, wildly successful. Over the last three decades Americans started to believe that Main Streets used to be places of democratic mingling, mutually-binding commercial transactions, and various types of architecture. Trying to reclaim this past, they began patronizing the new historical sites.

The strongest aspect of *downtown America* is its successful challenging of the notion that American public life at the turn of the century was more democratic than it is today. As Isenberg argues, "The democratic, melting-pot downtown has been an evolving ideal, not a past accomplished reality from which Americans have strayed" (315). Highlighting the racial, ageist, and class exclusions that accompanied the construction of Main Street, Isenberg provides a strong challenge to the belief that an authentically democratic public sphere is in decline.

Also commendable is Isenberg's treatment of nostalgia. She acknowledges that some critics view historical marketing as exploitative—developers offer commodified, romanticized interpretations of the past—but she urges scholars to look at nostalgia's other significances. The success of historically-themed Main Streets derives from widespread dissatisfaction about contemporary urban life, and people travel to historic marketplaces because they cherish alternative versions of downtown. Some variants of nostalgia are "subversive" (260) because they reject contemporary mass marketing techniques. Other variants, however, are racist. Isenberg cites evidence indicating that some Americans nostalgize pre-1960s downtowns because they miss segregation.

Isenberg's description of the gender of downtown development contributes to feminist studies of retail. Historians have shown that 20th-century distributors regarded female shoppers as capricious but controllable. Demonstrating that investors and developers, too, viewed women along these lines, Isenberg shows that not only shopping spaces, but entire downtowns, were structured according to the belief that men could manipulate women.

Isenberg's treatment of female participants in Main Street's drama is less satisfactory. Feminist historians have argued that 20th-century women have viewed Main Street as a place to earn wages, run businesses, acquire household goods, seek

adventure, and pursue social contacts. Yet the only discussion in *downtown America* of women's perspectives concerns the municipal housekeeping movement. The author does cite a 1928 survey conducted at J. C. Penney's, noting that female respondents held various views on mass retail. Had she addressed female shoppers in a more sustained way, though, Isenberg might have been able to link feminist research to her analyses of public civic culture. Particularly important would have been a discussion of the connections among, first, shopping and the pursuit of commercial amusements; second, women's understandings of their civic duties and entitlements; and third, the gender of civic participation.

A more forceful addressing of the relationship between consumption and civil entitlements would also have enriched this study. Isenberg does touch on this subject, especially in her important discussion of 1960s civil rights' protests. Had she made it a more central thread of inquiry, though, she could have contributed to historians' understanding of America's reputation as a nation of citizen-consumers. How downtown retailers became gatekeepers of civil rights, and why the right to consume has become akin to an American citizenship entitlement, demand further exploration.

Yet Isenberg's objective is not to debate consumer politics. It is to challenge the narrative of decline that plagues downtown development. And here she succeeds admirably. Showing that investors devalued the people who actually lived, worked, and engaged in cultural activities on Main Street, she demonstrates that downtown development has been racist, ageist, and classist. She admirably traces the machinations that built the physical structures of US downtowns, and she successfully interprets a wealth of hitherto unexplored historical materials. Revealing the motivations behind investors' actions, highlighting the exclusions they spawned, and urging a new development ethic of inclusiveness, *downtown America* is an original addition to US urban historiography.

Donica Belisle  
Trent University

---

**Bellavance, Claude, et Pierre Lanthier, dir. *Les territoires de l'entreprise / The Territories of Business*. Sainte-Foy : Presses de l'Université Laval, 2004. Pp. x, 263. Illustrations.**

Cet ouvrage collectif offre quatorze des communications présentées au colloque d'histoire des affaires au Canada tenu à l'Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières en 2002 sur le thème « les territoires de l'entreprise ». Les communications sont regroupées en trois parties, portant respectivement sur l'entreprise dans le territoire urbain, la dynamique spatiale des marchés, et les structures, stratégies et territoires. Selon la quatrième de couverture, la question centrale soulevée dans l'ouvrage porte sur les rapports à l'espace entretenus par l'entreprise canadienne. Les articles abordent cette question centrale de manière inégale, mais constituent dans l'ensemble

une série de contributions appréciables au domaine de l'histoire des entreprises.

Dans la première partie de l'ouvrage, deux articles retiendront tout d'abord l'attention des lecteurs férus d'histoire urbaine. Claire Poitras fait ressortir comment l'insertion des bâtiments techniques (les centraux téléphoniques) et administratifs des entreprises de téléphone s'est réalisée sous le modèle de « service public », qui faisait de ces équipements immobiliers un élément des stratégies de relations publiques des entreprises. Ainsi les entreprises de téléphone choisirent pour leurs bâtiments des formes respectueuses du milieu architectural environnant; les bâtiments construits dans des quartiers résidentiels, par exemple, reprennent le style des maisons qui les entourent, tandis que les bâtiments administratifs participent plutôt d'un style monumental dégageant un « message de solidité et de permanence » partagé par d'autres édifices des centres-villes. Julie Duchesne, qui traite de l'implantation de la gare-hôtel Viger dans l'est de Montréal, s'attache à la stratégie du Canadien Pacifique dans ses relations avec la Ville de Montréal davantage qu'aux « conséquences topographiques et morphologiques » de l'aménagement de la gare Viger. Elle nous apprend par ailleurs peu de choses sur l'effet des expropriations sur les résidents du quartier. Analysant la répartition du risque dans l'espace urbain de la Montreal Fire Insurance Company, 1817–1820, Robert Sweeny vise pour sa part à démontrer que, dans le choix de ses clients, l'entreprise a tenu davantage compte de ses liens sociaux que des considérations spatiales ou de la nécessité d'étaler le risque dans l'espace.

Les deux autres textes de cette première section mettent moins l'accent sur les relations des entreprises avec l'espace urbain. Joanne Burgess et Gilles Lauzon décrivent les formes architecturales, les fonctions commerciales et la « vie intérieure » des magasins-entrepôts d'un important complexe immobilier de Montréal de 1850 à 1880, le « Cathedral Block ». Pour sa part, Alain Gelly montre comment les entreprises situées au bord du canal Lachine choisirent diverses formes d'énergie comme force motrice entre 1880 et 1920, l'électricité ne devenant la source la plus courante d'énergie que durant la dernière décennie de la période étudiée, en partie à cause de la hausse du coût du charbon durant la Première Guerre mondiale.

La deuxième section de l'ouvrage, consacrée à la dynamique spatiale des marchés, est la meilleure du livre. Dans un beau texte qui rend bien compte de la complexité et des diverses échelles des relations financières, France Normand esquisse les réseaux de crédit des marchands ruraux et des petites villes tels que ces réseaux ressortent des dossiers de faillite de la région de Trois-Rivières. Les marchands faillis obtenaient le plus souvent crédit chez des créanciers « ponctuels » ne détenant qu'une seule créance, mais l'importance des créanciers « prédominants », gros fournisseurs, souvent montréalais, œuvrant à l'échelle de la province, s'accroît rapidement de 1870 à la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Yvan Rousseau se penche sur la chute puis la remontée des entreprises francophones sur le marché québécois de l'assurance vie au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Son étude confirme la « dua-