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NOT EVERY TOWN IS QUAIN



DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT By Barry Cassidy

As an active participant in downtown revitalization, I often read downtown plans and sometimes wonder if they are just part of a mass-produced document where the town name is changed. The word “quaint” appears often in many of these plans.

Like many of you, I have used Artificial Intelligence and thought I would ask it what ‘quaint’ actually means, because I thought I might be missing something. It told me the following:

Old-fashioned charm: This is the most common meaning today. A quaint cottage has a charming, old-fashioned quality.

Unusual or peculiar: Something can be described as quaint if it is strange or odd, but in an interesting or amusing way.

I immediately thought of all the vinyl siding in downtown Frackville, which is strange and odd but by no means quaint. Then I considered how people want to make every town feel special, and ‘quaint’ has somehow become a distorted word.

There is a formula for small-town success, and many believe it is rooted in historic restoration through the Main Street Program. It follows a four-point approach and has been very effective in towns with historic building inventories.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, a large amount of demolition funding was available, leading many to demolish their historic properties, which caused the loss of quaintness. The winners and losers from that time went on to become bigger and more successful, while others ended up with vacant lots. Sometimes, vacant lots can be paved over for parking, but if too many buildings are demolished, parking becomes unnecessary.

I reflect on my previous projects, many of which included historic lighting features and the restoration of some original facades to bring back the look of the past. That isn’t the only approach, and in some towns, restoration isn’t an option. There needs to be a formula for those towns.

I have been contemplating how my “good works” agenda is no longer effective. People don’t respect my work

unless they pay for it. The issue for them is that my fee schedule is too high, and they can’t afford me. So, I plan to try to make something work and possibly do one last town.

I aim to establish a new paradigm for addressing towns that are not quaint or do not aspire to be quaint. We are at the ¼ point in this century, and we need to respect the past, but we don’t need to have everyone relive it. The virus emerged in 2020 and had a significant impact on towns and cities across America. People did not go to work, and remote work was reinforced as the acceptable way to conduct business. Children did not go to school, and more classic rock stars died before I got to see them in person.

Things have changed, and we need to realize that we are no longer living in Charles Dickens’ world — The immersive theme park in Chatham, Kent, England, that recreates scenes from his novels and life. It’s time to reconsider the course of action for some of these towns.

I remember while I was attending the London School of Economics and Political Science, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, made famous by Charles Dickens, was his novel from the mid-19th century, and was located in the middle of their complex on 13-14 Portsmouth Street. As I am, I brought up how the infill development was impacting the building, and the class lecture turned to my issue of impact on historic buildings that day.

Infill housing and commercial buildings can set the tone for future development. We must not be trapped by a narrative that adorns the past at the expense of our future. “Don’t build out of scale,” as it disrupts the existing building’s sense of place, is a mistaken premise for some of the towns. It is up to the city to determine the best course of action to survive in the new century.

Old office buildings need to be converted to housing. Some buildings are no longer functional, and conversion to a use that would violate a parking ordinance when no one goes there anymore and there is a surplus of parking.

It is a story of adjustment. I would like to create a town like that and be a little avant-garde in my approach.

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