social historian. The well-captioned photographs elevate it to double duty as coffee-table material for occasional browsing, in addition to its serious nature as a chronicle of the blending of workplace and residence as related to the railroad industry.

Doo Dah!: Stephen Foster and the Rise of American Popular Culture
by Ken Emerson

by Lynne Conner

In Doo Dah!: Stephen Foster and the Rise of American Popular Culture, author Ken Emerson analyses Stephen Foster’s lingering musical legacy through a variety of culturally-informed filters: race; class; economics; and finally issues of taste and style in American society. By looking at Foster through these filters, Emerson provides a clear narrative structure not only for telling Stephen Foster’s life story, but, more importantly, for helping to put to rest the myriad pieces of misinformation about America’s first professional musician that have collected over the 20th century. Two years ago, when I began researching his life for a theater project, I was astonished to discover only a small handful of Foster biographies — all of them written before 1952. Among them was Morrison Foster’s self-serving My Brother Stephen, published in 1932. Morrison Foster was the song-writer’s older brother, and there can be no ignoring his blatant public relations agenda—an agenda that resulted in the white-washing of many critical aspects of Foster’s personality and experiences. Other Foster biographies, including Harvey Gaul’s The Minstrel of the Alleghenies (besides being out-dated and old-fashioned) use My Brother Stephen as a primary source. The result of this paucity of solid documentation and critical analysis is that Foster, who died young and left very few personal records, has been for many years a repository for too much praise, or too little.

With the publication of Doo Dah!, Stephen Collins Foster has at last been given his due: a biographically-driven analysis notable for bringing contemporary standards of historiography to bear on this remarkable man’s life and art. Well-written, interesting, and sometimes illuminating, Doo Dah! is neither a paean to the songwriter, nor a condemnation. It attempts rather to look critically, thoughtfully and imaginatively at the evolution of the use and the meaning of Foster’s music in American culture. Along the way, it also manages to talk insightfully about larger issues of our society, most notably race relations in the 19th and 20th centuries.

As Emerson makes abundantly clear in his introduction, it is entirely appropriate that a Foster biography should become the site for a discussion centered on American race relations. He points out that through the years, Foster has been used as a poster boy for progressive thinking and practice (argued by those who Lynne Conner is Director of Stages in History, the History Center’s resident theatre group.) see his plantation songs as compassionate evocations of slave life) and as a perpetrator of racism (argued by those who see his plantation songs as exploitive of African American culture). But Emerson also points out the ironic fact that in his day, Foster wrote about the lives of Southern slaves with an unusual level of compassion and pathos while at the same time belonging to the anti-abolitionist Democratic party. To his credit, Emerson recognizes that it is just this kind of inherent contradiction that makes Foster such a fascinating subject.

Doo Dah! goes beyond the issue of race to other discussions, most notably Emerson’s suggestion that Foster’s life as an artist serves as the prototype for the tortured American pop icon. Foster had an unstable and largely unhappy childhood and an even more unstable adulthood that included bouts of severe depression, chronic alcoholism, and unyielding economic crises. More provocatively, Emerson points out that, like his rock-n-roll descendents (most notably Elvis Presley), Foster took elements of black culture and used them to create a new pop form for white consumption. Anyone interested in contemporary approaches to cultural studies will appreciate these strains of research and analysis in this much-needed study of the life and art of Stephen Foster.

Main Street Revisited: Time, Space, and Image Building in Small-Town America
by Richard V. Francaviglia

by Philip Langdon

Until a quarter-century ago, no self-respecting town could have done without its Main Street. That central thoroughfare, whether beautiful or drab, was where you found the community’s leading institutions: sober-looking banks; old, established churches; retailers that attracted customers from throughout the hinterland; public buildings like the library and the post office — and maybe even the high school, if the board of education hadn’t blindly decided to build a new school on some dull-as-dishwater acreage at the edge of town.

It’s no secret what happened. Main Street gradually gave up most of the things that once made it the powerful, magnetic center of daily life. And yet, in the face of all the sharp reductions in its functions, Americans still feel great affection for the traditional, tightly built Main Street — a convivial place capable of bringing together every segment of the populace, from the elite to the eccentric. Richard Francaviglia, a history professor and director of the Center for Greater Southwestern Studies and the History of Cartography at the University of Texas at Arlington, has studied small towns and their centers for more than three decades, and his new book explores the changes Main Street has Philip Langdon’s most recent book is A Better Place to Live: Reshaping the American Suburb, recently released in paperback by the University of Massachusetts Press. He is a writer and editor in New Haven, Conn.
undergone in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Francaviglia dispels the sentimental notion that in the not-so-distant past, Main Street possessed a character that was wholly local. He argues that for more than a century, Main Street has consistently incorporated the standardization of its period — in layout (grid patterns repeated ad infinitum), building configuration (the vast majority of businesses occupied long, narrow buildings), and style (Victorian architectural fashions were brought in from the world at large). "As earlier buildings were remodeled to match new construction," Francaviglia observes, "American small town streetscapes took on a very stylized, and highly standardized, appearance by the 1880s." Indeed, the high degree of standardization that emerged by the late 19th century is, in his view, a chief reason why individuals in every corner of America carry remarkably similar images of Main Street in their minds.

Francaviglia elucidates how a typical Main Street would fill in over the years, its separate, free-standing buildings gradually evolving into a parade of continuous façades — a composition coherent enough to make the street and sidewalks feel like what urban designers call an "outdoor room." This cohesive organization — with buildings linking together to form a pleasing community space — is a source of Main Street's lasting emotional power.

From studying Main Street, Francaviglia proceeds to examine downtown as a whole. First, he says, a town would typically generate a short, linear Main Street business district. If commercial development reached a length of four blocks, and the town continued growing, the downtown would then shift toward a more squared-off form, with the development of nearby streets — thereby keeping the downtown from losing its compact, walkable character.

For general readers, Main Street Revisited is alternately dry and engaging. A series of 16 axioms of Main Street development, interspersed through the chapters, are textbook-like in tone. On the other hand, the author presents interesting tips on how to interpret Main Street buildings. Don't take at face value the year carved in stone at the top of an old building, he warns; "the Victorian façade bearing a particular date may actually commemorate that extensive remodelling, not indicate the first time a building appeared on the site. In fact, the rear elevation of a building is usually the most effective single part in helping one to determine the building's actual age and original construction technique." It's a shame that the book's photos, many of them shot during Francaviglia's travels, are so gray and indistinct.

Some of the most intriguing information in Main Street Revisited concerns regional variations. In the coal-mining towns of Ohio's Hocking Valley, Main Street commercial buildings are given a distinctive touch by second-floor porches, overhanging the sidewalks. In the Upland South from Georgia to Missouri and central Texas, sidewalks and building lots often are elevated above the streets, with concrete steps leading down to the curbs. In Western Pennsylvania, central Ohio, and Indiana, many towns laid out in the early 1800s have squares (open areas without buildings) created by removing the corners from each of four adjoining blocks. Gettysburg is given as an example of a square with a traffic circle in it, but locals can undoubtedly think of others.

The circle-in-a-square plan, which Francaviglia traces back to William Penn's plan for Philadelphia, ultimately was incorporated into the idealized Main Street of Disneyland, a seductive theme-park street that Francaviglia believes has played a key role in recent American culture, encouraging millions of people to appreciate once again the charm of traditional Main Streets. He seems to give Walt Disney much of the credit for a national revival of interest in Main Street — both as an old place that deserves to be brought back to life and as a model for new commercial development. This Walt worship strikes me as overdone. There were many other developments in American culture that led to the rediscovery of Main Street's merits. Among them were widespread reaction against the sterility of modern urban design; dismay at ugly and placeless commercial strips; the rise of the historic preservation moment; and eloquent writings like those of Jane Jacobs extolling the virtues of traditional street life.

Francaviglia forgets that real Main Streets had never entirely lost their popular appeal. The oddest thing about this book, in fact, is its lack of conviction that Main Street is, in important ways, better for society than shopping malls and roadside strips. In his concluding pages, the author writes, incredibly, that today's commercial strips "perform much the same function as the original" Main Street; "they simply and honestly perpetuate the connection between the stationary merchant and the mobile customer," while dispensing with "unnecessary socializing." Unnecessary socializing? This is the hogwash you'd expect from Wal-Mart headquarters, not from a thoughtful observer of the decline of America's historic community grounds. Fortunately, Francaviglia delivers a wealth of worthwhile information before he stumbles into this strange, final surrender of judgment.

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