

## [The United Nations of Main Street](#)

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*Written by Doug Loescher*



*We always knew they were out there.* Spawning in far-away places and off our radar, “Main Street” revitalization programs have been popping up around the globe in recent years at an astonishing rate. These “sister” programs are now saving historic town centers in Canada, Belgium, Great Britain, France, Italy, Switzerland, and even Japan! Whether they are precisely based on the National Trust’s [Four Point Approach](#) or not, the spirit of [Main Street](#) – which took root in the U.S. thirty years ago – has now translated successfully into nearly a dozen languages and at least a thousand programs worldwide (that we know of).

So it was fitting to mark this milestone with a formal ceremony, held a few weeks ago in Quebec, Canada, as part of their annual *Rues Principales* (French for Main Street) conference. Joining Quebec’s Foundation Director François Varin and Director General Pierre Francis, representing several European networks, I was honored to sign this international agreement of “mutual recognition” for preservation-based economic development programs on both sides of the Atlantic.

Why is this big news? First, it validates the vision of so many champions in our field over the years... to save historic buildings that help save communities. The power of an idea – as uniquely American as Main Street – turns out to be a universal value that matters everywhere, regardless of our nation of origin or the language we speak.

Second, it opens the door to future possibilities, where we can teach the world what we’ve learned over the past three decades — and maybe even learn a few new tricks ourselves. We may have been “first out of the gate” here in the US with a response to the negative impact of sprawl, but sadly, many other countries are starting to catch up. It has only been recently, for example, that many of our global colleagues have seen stores close – and development stall – in their city centers.

Yet, because it’s a truism that innovation almost always happens on the fringe, it’s worth watching those who are operating just “outside the box” of the US Main Street program. Where better to look for new innovations than places where our approach is truly novel? I’m fascinated to see how the seed of our ideas can take root on foreign soils, and possibly produce hybrid solutions we can bring back to the states.

Ceremonies and certificates are not the same as progress or success, so we know that this agreement in itself can't change the world. But the event does give us all a chance to step back, and see that we are part of a bigger puzzle. And when we can see the patterns from this higher view, we might find new solutions we didn't notice before. At the very least, it provides a renewed conviction that we are on the right path here in the U.S., with a universal value and enduring idea – called Main Street – that can be understood and spoken in any language.

*Doug Loescher is the director of the [National Trust Main Street Center](#).*