Economic Figures

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Abstract

Economic Figures

The title economic figures refer to both finances and the people (as figures) that are affected by monetary instability. People in two consumer locations are documented photographically through two projects that tell the story of the evolving sites of strip mall and main street shopping. In *Displacing Main Street*, photographs of people entering strip mall stores are installed on abandoned main street store sites. ‘the store’ are photographs that show the intimate story of my parents struggle to keep their main street small business open. The final exhibition combines these two works in a single gallery to give the viewer the opportunity to reflect on their own spending habits.
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Introduction

*Economic Figures*, uses photography to address the common cultural and economic concern of the transition of commerce from local main street locations to the destination shops of big chain stores located in strip mall sites. This transition became a personal issue when the 2008 recession threatened my family's sole source of income. This jolted me into a state of hyper-awareness of the dominant business models that permeate consumer culture, the result of which creates a directly negative affect on the economic stability of small business owners and the communities they serve. In response to my understanding that as consumers we are all complicit, I began to make photographs that attempt to question the power and authority of big chains, by re-asserting the value of local business; and placing responsibility and power of consumer choice back on individuals. Two photographic explorations, *Displacing Main Street* and *the store*, are the results of this investigation into contemporary retail economics through observable phenomena and my personal story.

*Displacing Main Street*, uses the practices of activist art in subversively placing images of people entering chain store facades in a public forum; that of empty local store fronts. As Nina Felshin states, activist art is "...characterized by the innovative use of public space to address issues of sociopolitical and cultural significance and to encourage community or public participation as a means of effecting social change."\(^1\) Installing images in these sites makes visible the result of the consumers shopping at chain stores. Instead of making the choice of shopping based on immediate gratification, it asks the consumer to become informed about

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whom their money empowers and about whom is more likely to empower the community in return.

The photographs of my family's business in, 'the store', point to what is lost in this cultural transition from local to destination shopping. The quality of a small business in the community is demonstrated by the way my parents, David and Alma Wilson, take individual care of each of their customers. Images of my mom sewing, or my father hand cleaning equipment with his smallest tools aim to show value in the personal connections made through a retail context. This is the micro scale of the social political issue that my exhibition, Economic Figures, unpacks for the viewer. It is how I have come to understand that there is a connection between the consumer and economics in the small-scale retail environment.

Displacing Main Street

"Sell 'em low, stack 'em high, make those downtown merchants cry!"

-Chain Store Employee Chant²

*Displacing Main Street* interacts with the transition of commerce from local main street locations to the destination shops of big chain stores located in strip mall sites. This project seeks to question the status quo of this shifting cultural environment, reasserting the influence of the choices made by individuals. The photographs function within the boundaries of activist art by decentering the viewer. As Barthes states "Ultimately, Photography is subversive not when it

frightens, repels, or even stigmatizes, but when it is *pensive*, when it thinks."³ *Displacing Main Street* requests the general public to pause and consider what is lost in their communities. Formal connections make the idea of replacement apparent asking the viewer to consider what is affected by their spending power. That if they choose to shop in local stores instead of chains, local shopping might be strong enough to thrive.

Since the inception of chain retail a system of direct competition was implemented toward local Main Street business as "Building new stores does not expand the pie; it only reapportions it."⁴ Cultural landscapes evolve as older forms become obsolete. This shift was enforced by post WWII economics and the necessity for the growth of public infrastructure that could support the popularity of the automobile. Non-urban areas changed from pedestrian friendly towns to suburbs dominated by the car, since changes in the consumer relationship with shopping required a new landscape to include the automobile. Lacking in off-street parking and a plan for the combination of car and pedestrian traffic patterns, Main Street was not prepared. Chains took advantage of the cheap land and open spaces of “taxpayer strips” to design their shopping centers with large parking lots, easy access from highways and designated pedestrian areas in consideration of automobiles.⁵ The evolutionary result is the contemporary strip mall.

New Big-Box stores are sold to communities as job creators. Though it may take several years, these stores actually cause job loss. Their goal is to dominate the market and once they have done this they will then raise their prices to the same as the local store or just pennies less. This works because the local stores are either severely crippled or out of business completely.

⁵ Espe´rdy, Gabrielle. *Modernizing Main Street*. (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2008.)
The people who were previously employed by these stores for good wages and good benefits no longer have jobs. The other local businesses that those stores used for advertising and other retail costs lose business and they close. The people who worked there lose their jobs. Eventually, reducing “…a county's retail employment by an average of 180 jobs, or 3.2 percent.” These good jobs are replaced with minimum wage employment. Devastating local economy that was once strong in its diversity and community ties.

One of the benefits of supporting small business is that a significantly higher percentage of the money spent stays within the local economy. Michael Shuman describes this as supporting economic development rooted in local ownership and import substitution (LOIS). Many communities believe that the only way to create new jobs and bring in more wealth is to form an economic cluster of big business by attracting industry and big stores. However a diverse and healthy group of “Small-Marts” consistently strengthens a community because of the Economic Multiplier. This is an economic term that refers to the calculation of the relationship between how much of the money spent in a specific region stays within those geographic parameters. In a 2003 study the economic multiplier of a Borders compared with two local book stores in Austin, Texas found that “…one hundred dollars spent at the Borders would circulate thirteen dollars in the Austin economy, while the same one hundred dollars spent at the two local bookstores would circulate forty-five.” Small-Marts usually spend more money locally at other Small-Mart businesses; they bank locally, they advertise in local newspapers and offer well paid jobs with

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benefits “…that form the backbone of a city's middle class and the core of its tax base.” Instead of supporting the local economic structure the chain store conversely extracts money out of a community. Stuck in this loop the consumer class is losing their wealth and their community.

To explore these ideas I conceptually converge both sites by installing images of people in the facades of chain stores on the ruins of the closed or abandoned storefronts of main street sites. The photographs function within the boundaries of activist art by decentering the viewer. As Barthes states "Ultimately, Photography is subversive not when it frightens, repels, or even stigmatizes, but when it is pensive, when it thinks." A strong white border simulates a picture frame thus highlighting the photographic image and grabbing the attention of pedestrians and drivers. Printed on a vinyl these images indefinitely hold their integrity in the exterior weather conditions of this alternative exhibition space. Inserting photographs on the windows of these sites invites the passerby to investigate the interior. Instead of covering the entire window, room is left to view the interiors of these former main street business sites. Remnants such as shelving or color of paint can be seen. Thus a comparison is made between the new and the old model of retail sites.

Figure 1: 230 Main Street West, Rochester, NY 14614

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Placed in-situ, the photographs that comprise *Displacing Main Street* appropriates the strategy of repetitions of architectural design and behavior familiar in corporate owned retail sites, to foreground a pattern of consumption that reproduces that same pattern. Applying the techniques of street photography to this simulated main street, I envision it as a stage prepared for a specific performance. Through the ability to capture the moment where action and scene combine to make an event worth photographing, the photographer transforms the ordinary action into a performance. Thus, *Displacing Main Street*, is a play on the history of street photography where the relationship between an individual and the vernacular retail environment is addressed.

Street photographer Zoe Strauss makes her images in the community in which she lives in Philadelphia. Interested in walking the streets and meeting the people in her community Strauss documents people, signs and landscapes as a reflection of her environment and lifestyle. These images are then displayed in a non-gallery site, under the I-95 underpass. Here they are sold for five dollars. Instead of taking these images and selling them in a high art venue, Strauss makes her artwork available to those in the community that she photographs.

Historically, strip mall sites were designed based on the theatrical stage by one of the first architects and designers of these retail sites; Victor Gruen. He borrowed from his experience in theater, using color, shape, repetition, windows and lighting, to set a metaphorical stage for the drama of the social interaction of shoppers. According to Jeffery Hardwick, "Drawing on his theater experience, Gruen employed two familiar metaphors for describing the drama of modern storefronts: the advertisement and the stage."\(^{11}\) Gruen knew that the design of retail architecture was inseparable to its profit. Using every trick of drama and emotional manipulation he was successful in directing the flow of human bodies to his buildings. His innovation in retail

architecture and design led to social and financial growth of the site, since “…it will include features to induce people to drive considerable distances to enjoy its advantages.”

Robert Venturi describes the forms of architecture used in strip malls as the "Decorated Shed". That is architecture that has become a symbol in space instead of a form in space, whose exterior is highly decorated while its interior is nothing more that a horizontal box. The exterior facades of this type of build function well in the "autoscape", in a culture where overcoming vast distances and high speeds is necessary for communication. This is a new form of architecture for a new scale of landscape derived from the dominance of car culture.

My photographs document the observation of these anonymous figures in the exteriors of the ubiquitous retail site of the mall. When photographing these sites, I participate in the flow of authority that is maintained by the constant circulation of power and knowledge inherently linked to observation. According to Susan Sontag, "To photograph is to appropriate the thing being photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and, therefore, like power.”

To capture moments of consumers in these privately owned public spaces I become a voyeur and part of the mechanism of surveillance.

Michel Foucault describes the power of surveillance as the ability to hold knowledge over a subject. This power-knowledge relationship is not only activated by a permanent record such as a recording, a photograph, or a document, but also a hierarchy of observation is constantly applied through ones individual visibility to other individuals: "this reign of 'opinion'...represents a mode of operation through which power will be exercised by virtue of the

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mere fact of things being known and people seen in a sort of immediate, collective and anonymous gaze."\textsuperscript{15} The concept of Foucault's system of power and knowledge as described by the process of surveillance, observation and report is played with further as the document/report is in the form of photographs that are then given back to the public to evaluate.

The people in my images are understood abstractly through their behaviors, they are anonymous, allowing the viewer to envision their own past behaviors. An interest in observable phenomena leads these images away from a portraiture that is interested in communicating a deeper identity. I look for ways in which "People have become elements of animation in a pleasantly planned environment..."\textsuperscript{16} Following the theories of Foucault I observe how specific repeated actions, such as the practice of pushing a cart of goods before our bodies, is a form of performance that allows people to actively participate in their individualization and in their repression. A set of operations maintained by the social and economic forces that act on individuals that enter these sites leads to such specific behaviors. The application of disciplinary forces has become so invisible that ordinary behaviors, absurd and without rationality when taken out of that psychological context, have become normal.

To make these photographic observations I maintain an anonymous relationship to the site and subject that I photograph by concealing myself either in my car, or behind other structures found in these spaces. This is done to for two reasons; in order to avoid being removed from the site and to prevent my figures from interacting with the camera instead of the site. The architecture is also intentionally photographed to be anonymous. The image is either composed or digitally manipulated during post processing to remove all identifying text. This shifts


culpability from a specific company and places the critique on the system as a whole. This removal of a text also reveals the underlying affects of the visual semiotic codes inherent in Mall Facades, as the identity of each store is now understood by the choice of architectural referents and color codes found in the facades.

Artists have explored the phenomenon of the suburban landscape since suburbia became part of the dominant American culture in the mid-twentieth century. Ed Ruscha documented the ordinary in the series of images in his book Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations. His images of gas stations approached the issues of car culture and suburban structures by simply documenting their insertion into the landscape. "The pictures were stripped of any artistic frills and reduced to an essentially topographic state, conveying substantial amounts of beauty, emotion and opinion."17

The 1975 exhibit, New Topographics, Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape, brought together photographers who, partly influenced by Ruscha's work collectively documented the everyday American landscape through images of mobile homes, tract homes, industrial parks, coal factories, motels and suburban streets. Baltz's images of industrial parks examined the construction of new architecture and the convergence of structure and landscape. Interested in making an objective document, he used a formalist approach to depict the modern architecture found in his sites.

Brian Ulrich’s project Dark Stores documents the abandoned sites of chain retail locations. Though he began this project before the 2008 recession the closing of major chain names, such as Linens’ N Things, added to the interest of these sites. It is common for Big Box stores to abandon retail sites to build new stores using updated aesthetics, to move to a more

profitable location. The abandoned shells that litter the vernacular landscape are signs of the temporality of chain stores.

Matt Siber’s Untitled Project demonstrates how advertisements use of color and symbol are related to their written text. By separating the two forms of language the importance of reading each is conveyed to the viewer. This related to my project as by removing the text from each scene I enhance the idea of architecture as a symbol and the stage as advertisement.

Architecture is more than the practical creation of a useful space. The designs of these structures inform how we interact with other people. In discussing the places of gathering in the community, such as the market place, Jackson describes the presumed role of the individual: "It is assumed that those who come there are already aware that they are members of the community, responsible citizens and that on occasion they will participate in public discussions and take action on the behalf of the community"\(^\text{18}\) In a system where a shopping center is no longer in the center of a community, where the people come from vast distances and assemble anonymously, this sense of gathering as responsible citizens is unlikely and outdated. This project leads the viewer to re-evaluate the meaning of the impact of retail architecture has on their personal lives, on the choices they make as consumers. Asserting a responsibility on consumers to spend money (as little as it may be) in the ways that provides the best long-term benefits by first supporting their local community.

My personal story is an entry point into narrative of the lives of American independent business owners. As the child of two parents who run a small retail business together I have experienced consumer culture from the seller's perspective. My life experiences differ greatly from those who only understand retail from a consumer standpoint. I do not attempt to be objective, as the photographs document my personal story. I make images that both reveal the universal story of small business owners and the personal struggle of my parents for survival. With my camera I document their financial struggle. As I photograph the moments that reach below the surface, for the inevitable. That ‘the store’ will close.

Though Accent on Music (the store’s name) did provide our family's income, the store was never a thriving business. Over the years, my parents were able to keep a slice of a market that was quickly changing as digital music began to dominate the Hi-Fi culture. The store reached a moderate level of success when home theater installation was integrated into the business. The housing boom of the late 1990's and early 2000's became a source of economic opportunity for my parents. As suburban sprawl grew with new custom homes and businesses so
did their store’s economic stability. When the market for new custom homes crashed this source of income ended almost immediately. My family has been on the brink of financial ruin since the beginning of the 2008 recession.

I was 6 years old in 1989, when my parents became self-employed, opening Accent on Music Inc. As an only child I felt my own sacrifice as attention shifted away from me and towards ‘the store’. I became resentful of the time I was forced to spend there, due to the behavioral rules that prevented me from acting like a kid; don’t make a mess, be polite to customers, don’t interrupt conversations; basically be charmingly invisible. Mostly I just read books, drew, or painted on scraps of paper. As I got older the rules changed to include responsibilities such as stamping and filing invoices, dusting and washing the windows (my least favorite) and answering the phone with the following script: “Accent on Music, How may I help you?” Though I was a child I was always part of their business. Photography provides me an entrance back to the store by allowing me to reconnect to my parent's situation. It gives me a reason to be present, to know what is going on day to day. Being there and hearing the stories, just knowing what is happening allows me to initiate my new role in the family an informed adult.

Photographing my parents during this vulnerable time is not an easy, as these images make our personal lives public. Initially I was afraid of exploiting them. Full of insecurity, my parents could not understand why they mattered enough to be photographed. These images tell the larger cultural economic crisis in a personal story. As Marianne Hirsch states artists who use family photographs can infuse the personal with cultural critique; "...in disrupting their own documentary authority and their use as evidence—photographs can become powerful weapons of
social and attitudinal change."¹⁹ From this perspective my parents are not portrayed as victims, but as strong individuals persevering in a competitive retail environment.

Accent on Music is not simply a place where my parents go to work; it is where they have spent the majority of their lives as a married couple. For twenty years their lives surrounded this business. To build a business from scratch required constant attention. This strained their relationship as disappointments led to personal arguments over business strategies. Contemporary photographer Doug Dubois collected moments that revealed the underlying tensions of his family over a period of 25 years. Each of his images illustrates the different emotional connections felt between his family members in various moments. While one image depicts the distance between his parents the next shows the intimacy of their marriage. His search for the fleeting gestures that convey the underlying emotional truth as a result of family dynamics is similar to the aspects of images of my parents interacting on a marital level. However Dubois images show an emotional and physical separation between his parents while in the image of my parents here the space between them is fleeting and evidence of the type of routine interactions they have developed. Over the years, the store and their marriage became intertwined. Their life together centered on the business. Their customers are their only social outlets. They do not take days off and any trip or family vacation is planned to coincide with home installations. With no time apart from each other living in highly stressful situation their marriage suffered. These tensions have left the relationship in a mixed state of dependence and

Separated by gender roles; responsibilities followed traditional female and masculine lines. My mother carried the weight of the dual role of business owner and housewife. It was expected that even after a long day at work that she come home a cook dinner, which she did every night from scratch. At the store she is the executive assistant, the manager and the cleaning lady. She is also the person who maintains relationships with the customers by learning and remembering their individual stories. My father thinks he is the owner and that everyone else just works for him, including my mother. He is the salesman and with 30 plus years of experience has earned an international reputation for being one of the most knowledgeable people in the Hi-Fi industry. His responsibilities are more focused to the selling, installation and maintenance of the hi-fi equipment; like a matchmaker his job is to find the right system. The one with the right sound for each specific client:

“The trick is to pick one that does a good job of capturing for you the meaning and emotion of the performance, one that delivers the relationships, the patterns that we call music. The best way to do this is to listen through a piece of music and evaluate your own response; if it’s a good feeling, it’s a good HiFi!”

-From Listening, a manifesto by David Wilson

My mother decorated the store as if it were her home, using color palettes to reflect her Puerto Rican heritage. Details such as a hung tapestry or flowers gave the showrooms the
warmth. This was a good selling tool, one that allowed clients to envision a music system expertly integrated into their homes. It is necessary to the success of the business that it look presentable, to inspire respect and confidence in the customer. Keeping up the appearance of a successful business took priority over every financial decision in our lives. The store always came first. Our actual home, a true 'fixer-upper' was never finished. All of the projects started by my parents before the store opened were left incomplete. There was never enough money or time leftover to make the house into our home.

When you own a store there is no such thing as a guaranteed paycheck. Growing up, I was always hyper-aware that money was an issue. Aside from the increasing dilapidated state of the house there were often clues that we were in a constant state of catching up to debt. Bill collectors called so often that by the time I was in middle school I already knew the line; 'the check’s in the mail'. I often came home to find that the phone has been turned off, that we don’t have electricity, or that we have ran out of oil for heat. We always seemed to be waiting to finish a job so that the customer would pay their bill. My mom, the person in charge of the store and house finances, never wanted me to know when money was low and still attempts to protect me from this truth today.
My parents are fortunate to have strong friendships with their customers. Without these people, the business would have failed quickly and quietly like most of the Hi Fi stores in their region. This is a common story during times of economic recession, as Stacy Mitchell describes in her book, Big-Box Swindle; "Retail profit margins are slim and, while a chain has the financial resources to ride out losses at some of its superstores indefinitely, only a small decline in revenue can make the difference for an independent." My parents survived because of the sacrifices they were willing to make. As my mother say’s “those other stores just don’t know how to tighten their belts.” This allowed the money collected from previous jobs, the couple small sales a month and upgrading of the equipment of long-term customers, to keep Accent on Music and my family alive.

Photographer Larry Sultan documented the retirement of his father with the intention of describing the impact of Reagan economics on his family. Similar to my approach he would visit a place from his youth, his family home, to make images that could tell a universal story. However what he found in his pictures was that the inspiration of sociology only became a side story to the emotional connections between him and his parents; “What drives me to continue this work is difficult to name. It has more to do with love than with sociology, with being a subject in the drama rather than a witness…These are my parents. From that simple fact, everything follows.”

Like Sultan's discovery, I found that my images also attempt to prevent a loss, that of ‘the store’. Looking at the portraits of my parents working reveals the emotional connections between us: me as the child and them as the parents. Images of my parents looking at me, looking at them through the lens of a camera place the viewer in my position in the family. As Hirsch explains family photographs display the relationship structure between

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individuals through looking; "...the ways in which the individual subject is constituted in the space of the family through looking...how looks position members of the family in relation to one another, in their predetermined but forever negotiable roles and interactions..."\textsuperscript{21} When I look at this portrait of my mother in Figure 12, I find a moment made permanent through its photographic capture, moments that my parents would rather protect me from. Though she tries to appear happy the concerns of the day and her love for me are evident in her eyes. When looking at this photograph the viewer is given the opportunity to fully experience my mother's gaze. The sadness in her eyes comes from the disappointment in her inability to continue to take care of herself, my father and of me. By coming home I have changed my role in the family from child to adult ready to piece together a family structure of mutual support.

Mitch Epstein documented the closing of the furniture and real estate business that supported his extended family. Aptly named, \textit{Family Business}, includes a collection of still lives and interiors that expand on the portraits. This combination elaborates on the details that evoke the complexity of emotions found in the portraits. The inclusion of documents adds to the narrative by giving details of their work. One can read the partial text, discerning enough of the sentence's to comprehend the language of the business, its ordinary tasks and the day-to-day stresses of owning a small business. In 'the store', images of unpaid invoices and post it notes similarly reveal a factual understanding of how it operates.

Accent on Music sells Hi-Fidelity audio and video products. These are luxury systems that provide quality of sound. They cost thousands of dollars because these unique products are designed to enrich one's life for decades. Hi Fi manufacturers do not used the strategy of planned obsolescence to compel repeat purchases. Their products do not break. People buy these products because they are interested in the quality of the experience of listening to music. However we do not live in a culture that values quality and endurance. The powerful leader of chain stores, Wal-Mart, has further changed the relationship between the manufacture and the seller. Chain stores control the quality of the products made by the manufacturer. The manufacturer has no choice but to comply with a company that has become their biggest or sole purchaser. "Companies that depend on one or two chains for a large portion of their revenue, as many now do, are perpetually at risk of being crushed and losing everything." Demands include reducing prices, producing large quantities for specific sale days and even accepting the forced return of unsold goods at the manufacturers expense. In essence, turning Big-Box stores into consignment retailers, who then take no financial risk and can continuously provide more products for cheaper prices. This culture of valuing quantity over quality of product leads to customers asking my parents for discounts when they are already only making 10% of the sales price. Repeat business is also a problem, since once you buy a system you will never need to replace it. Long-term customers buy upgrades and get regular maintenance of their stereos, some decide that they want a more impressive system 5 or 10 years down the road, but once that first big sale is made a client is unlikely to make a similar purchase. They do not need to.

The store has not yet closed. This photography project is not about the demise or nostalgia for a once successful business. This is a complex narrative that attempts to suggest

multiple ways to understand the relationship between the personal and the public and the nature of the photography as a personal metaphor for a larger issue. It is about the will to endure over hard economic times and the work and fear and disappointments that accompany that goal. These images hold their significance and meaning in tension they expand from personal experience the universal story of small business owners to open a conversation that is relevant in contemporary culture. As Martha Rosler writes about the New Documentary photographers; "...a growing body of documentary works committed to the exposure of specific abuses caused by people's jobs, by the financier's growing hegemony over the cities, by racism, sexism and class oppression..."23

This is the sort of documentary that my images belong. The story here is strength of character through perseverance.

Conclusion

Exhibited simultaneously *Displacing Main Street* and ‘the store’ allows for a dialogue between the closed store and the struggling store. A visual conversation between these two projects supports a more complete picture of the contemporary strife of local small businesses.

"There is something like a culture of environmental change, a pattern of day-to-day decisions worth exploring."\textsuperscript{24}

The movement towards the support of local businesses already has momentum and there are several ways to become informed about changing one’s lifestyle of become a supporter of local businesses. Stacey Mitchell and Michael Shuman’s blogs, The Institute for Local Self-Reliance New Rules Project and other websites provide access to articles and resources that describe how and what changes one can make. New this year is “Small Business Saturday”, a holiday shopping day for small businesses that joins Black Friday and Cyber Monday shopping post Thanksgiving. One can now easily find information on their local businesses from the Small Business Local Resources website. Large Chains are even imitating small business, hiding their corporate identity, to steal back customers they lost. Indicating that the shift in public attitude for local business has become a threat to chains.

\textit{Economic Figures} joins this movement using documentary photographs as a form of art activism, by distributing a message in the public sphere and the art gallery that engages public participation by changing the conversation. The viewer is placed in between these two sets of images, essentially completing the work. From the images of my parents devoting their lives to ‘the store’ and their customers the viewer is given an opportunity to re-evaluate what is lost

\textsuperscript{24} Jackson, John Brinckerhoff. \textit{Discovering the Vernacular Landscape}. (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1984), 68.

Figure 13: Economic Figures Exhibition

Figure 14: Economic Figures Exhibition
within the context of images of the closed local retail sites. This reveals a loss that is multiplied by each empty local site. Hopefully evoking a moment of self-reflection, one that influences future shopping habits towards a community centered outcome.
Selected Bibliography


