

# Have It Your Way:

## FAST-FOOD RESTAURANT DESIGN

By Edward T. McMahon

McDonald's! Burger King! Taco Bell! Wendy's! Hardee's! Pizza Hut! Subway! Kentucky Fried Chicken! Today there are more than 150,000 fast-food franchises in the United States, generating sales in excess of \$80 billion a year. Ever since Ray Kroc franchised the first McDonald's in 1954, fast-food restaurants have succeeded in deploying their standardized images from coast to coast.

Many people obviously like fast food, if they didn't, fast-food restaurants wouldn't be such an enormous economic success. But many people also question the loss of community character and cultural distinctiveness that accompanies the cookie cutter architecture that seems to follow us everywhere. In a country of highly varied history, climate, culture, and terrain, thousands of cities and towns now look like they were put together with interchangeable parts.

Do fast-food restaurants all have to look exactly alike? Does a McDonald's in New Mexico have to be in the same style building as one in New York or New

Hampshire? Does a franchise on Main Street have to look like the same business outside of town on the strip? The answer to all of these questions is no, of course not. Franchises can be encouraged, and if necessary required, to make their buildings "fit" with the natural and historic character of each local community.

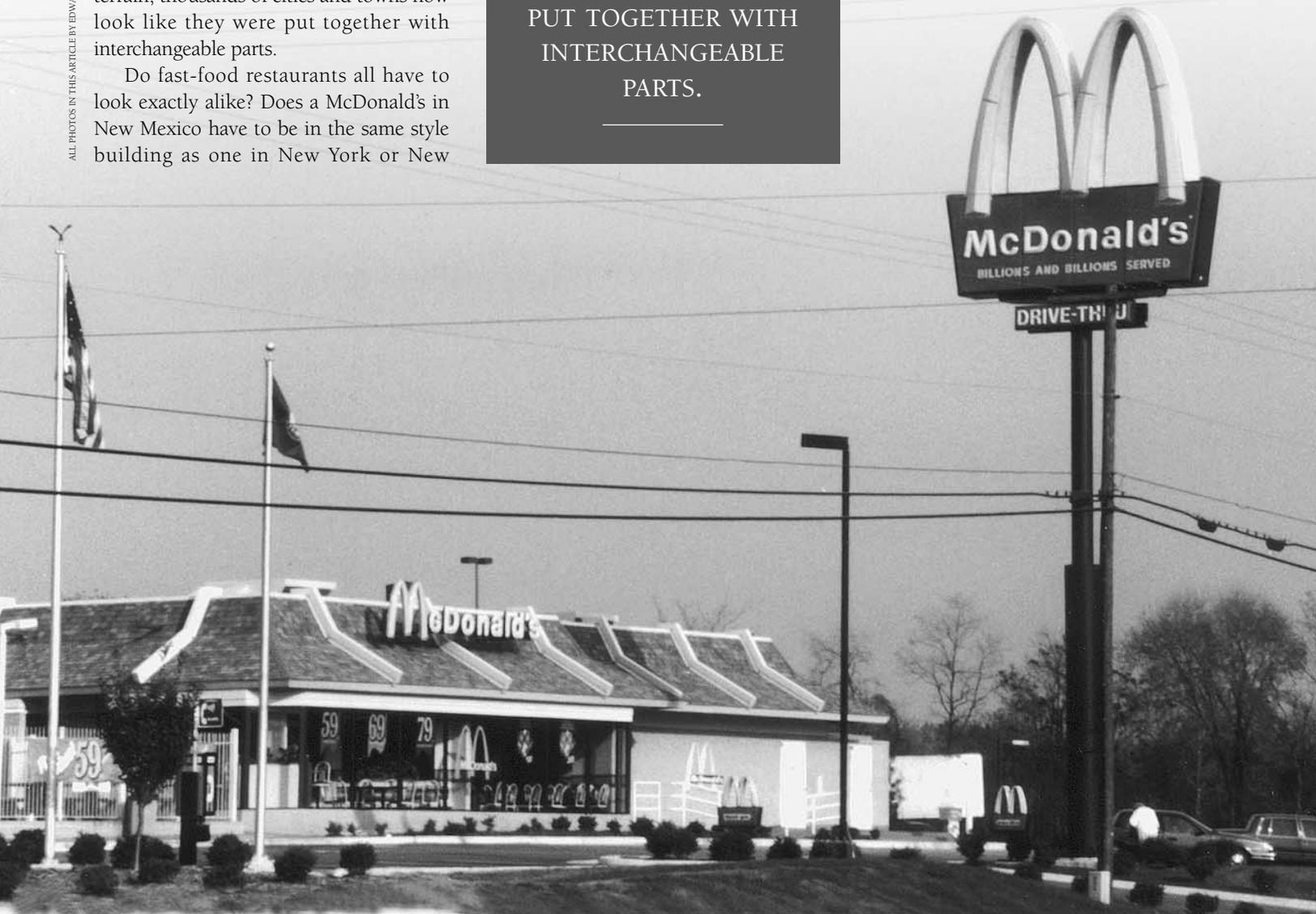
Today, most fast-food chains are willing —sometimes even eager— to give

their restaurants more individual style. For the most part, however, citizens, elected officials, developers, planners, and the public-at-large have no idea that new franchises can be an attractive community asset rather than a homogenizing eyesore.

This article will discuss tools and techniques that cities and towns can use to get franchise development to respect community character. It will provide examples of some of the numerous communities that have worked with national restaurant chains to reuse historic buildings or to construct new buildings that respect local identity. And it will hopefully empower local citizens, and planning boards, to refuse to accept standardized franchise design when it is inappropriate to their community.

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ALL PHOTOS IN THIS ARTICLE BY EDWARD T. MCMAHON UNLESS NOTED OTHERWISE





Left and above: Typical McDonalds and Pizza Hut. Anyplace U.S.A.

### UNDERSTANDING FRANCHISES

Franchises are contracts granted by national or regional companies allowing someone the exclusive right to operate one of their outlets within a specified area in return for an initial fee and a percentage of gross sales. The parent company usually provides supplies, equipment, training, advertising, and an overall business plan or concept. By offering a standardized product through a systematic operation, franchises or chains are able to offer low-cost products and services in a wide variety of markets.

In 1994, there were more than 550,000 franchise operations in the United States. Franchises account for almost 40 percent of all U.S. retail sales. Fast-food restaurants are one of the largest and most successful segments of the market. In 1992 *Entrepreneur Magazine* identified the ten “Most Attractive Franchises for Investors” — seven of the top ten were fast-food companies.

Fast-food franchises differ from other restaurants in several ways. First, fast-food emporiums are high volume businesses designed to get people in and out as fast as

possible. They offer a limited menu and standardized food preparation methods. Second, fast-food chains rely on name recognition and national advertising and marketing. Fast-food restaurants are popular throughout the world because they offer good food, at low prices, in clean and convenient surroundings.

Historically, the locations of choice for most fast-food operators have been highway strips, interstate exit ramps, and other high volume auto-oriented locations. In recent years, however, the fast-food industry has expanded well beyond its usual suburban locations. New growth areas include: historic areas, downtown business districts, upscale resorts, military bases, college campuses, mall food courts, airports, hospitals, and foreign countries.

### FRANCHISE DESIGN

Despite their economic success, fast-food operations can have undesirable side effects including: traffic congestion, noise, increased air pollution, trash, and litter. The focus of this article, however, is the architecture and design of fast-food operations. The problem is that while many Americans love the food, they often lament the loss of community identity and sense of place that comes with “cookie-cutter” corporate architecture.

Fast-food restaurants have helped to create what author James Howard Kunstler has called a “geography of nowhere”:

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Burger King in new building. Cathedral City, CA.

## Let's take a brief cross-country tour:

### 1. The Woodlands, Texas

The Woodlands is a thriving planned community of about 33,000 people outside of Houston. The Woodlands McDonald's does not have the telltale golden arches, billboards with twenty foot high French fries or Ronald McDonald playground. Instead, negotiations with town officials yielded a tree-shaded patio and a lushly landscaped parking area. The only signage is a small wooden sign tastefully placed amid a bed of flowers. The new, discretely designed McDonald's was an instant money-maker. It has consistently ranked among the top five grossing McDonald's in metropolitan Houston, and it routinely outperforms the chain's national average in gross annual sales per unit.

The Woodlands demonstrates that attractive, place-responsive design is good for business. In fact, tailoring a national chain to the local community can generate increased sales. For example, Jim Mitchell, an architect for the Southland Corporation (operator of the 7-11 convenience stores), says that while a "normal convenience store generates \$8,000 to \$12,000 a week, a well designed store can produce \$20,000 to \$25,000 a week."

### 2. Freeport, Maine

Freeport is a bustling town in Southeastern Maine, home of mail order giant L.L. Bean, and the site of one of America's most attractive McDonald's. In 1982, McDonald's purchased a 130 year old Colonial-style residence on Main Street with the intention of tearing it down to build a new eatery. The proposed McDonald's required a conditional use permit from the Zoning Board of Appeals. Local citizens opposed demolishing the building.

The ZBA approved the restaurant, but required McDonald's to reuse the existing building. To meet the company's needs, the ZBA permitted the construction of a new wing



McDonald's reuse of existing building. Freeport, ME.

behind the old house. The wing is in keeping with the original architecture, and it holds the working kitchen and serving areas. The restored house provides seating areas and a community meeting room.

Freeport illustrates the value of making fast-food restaurants subject to a "conditional use" or "special use" permit, which give communities an opportunity to consider building design, size, arrangement on the lot, landscaping, parking, signage, lighting, buffering, and other issues *before* granting a permit. It also shows that national chains usually have alternative plans they are willing to use to secure site approval in desirable locations.

### 3. Red Wing, Minnesota

Red Wing, Minnesota, is a small town (population 15,000) on the Mississippi River, about one hour east of Minneapolis. It is blessed with an impressive collection of Victorian Era buildings in five locally designated historic districts. Among the buildings are two restored turn-of-the-century railroad stations. One houses the offices of the Red Wing Chamber of Commerce, the other a Hardee's restaurant.



Hardee's in restored railroad station. Red Wing, MN.

In 1979, Hardee's acquired the site of the historic Chicago & Great Western Railroad Station intent on demolishing it to make way for a new fast-food outlet. At the time, the building was not in an historic district and there was no design review process. However, a group of local citizens approached the developers and talked them into saving the station. A company official explained that it had not occurred to Hardee's to preserve the building until it was suggested to them by local citizens.

For the past fifteen years the two story brick building has been a popular and profitable Hardee's franchise. The restaurant has on display a large collection of railroad memorabilia. The food ordering counter resembles ticket agents windows, while the old baggage loading dock is used as the drive thru.

Red Wing shows that even communities without design review, sophisticated zoning, or strict preservation controls can use the power of public opinion to convince corporate America that historic preservation is good for both business and the community.



McDonald's in new adobe-style building. Sedona, AZ.

### 4. Sedona, Arizona

There are no golden arches in Sedona, Arizona. Instead, they're turquoise and beige, to complement the high desert setting and clear blue skies of this Southwestern community. Set amid the beauty of Northern Arizona's red rock country, Sedona is one of the most popular and attractive destinations in the American Southwest. Incorporated as a city in 1988, Sedona developed comprehensive design review standards to promote compatibility between the man-made and natural environment. The city's design review manual includes the following guidelines for new development:

- Architectural transplants from other locales are neither appropriate nor desirable.
- The natural environment deserves authenticity and integrity in the built environment.
- Commercial, public facility, and multi-family residential developments can be designed with architectural character that accommodates structures in harmony with their natural settings.
- Franchise/monoculture (corporate signature) buildings and shallow or artificial imitations of "Western" architectural styles are not desirable.
- Natural structural rhythms, proportions, and color schemes can enhance our environmental surroundings. Careful site planning is the essential basis for designing and building structures on sensitive, often difficult terrain.

In 1990, when a McDonald's was proposed for Sedona, the local franchisee agreed to a regionally appropriate design, sensitive to the city's setting. Wendy's, Denny's, Texaco, and other national chains have also departed from their "off the shelf" designs to construct buildings that are compatible with Sedona's

special character. Tom Schaffer, the city's community development director, notes that "Sedona's business community supports the design review process because it realizes that Sedona's continued desirability as a tourist destination is dependent upon preserving its unique sense of place." Without a comprehensive design review process, Sedona would simply become "Anyplace U.S.A."

### 5. Coral Gables, Florida

Known for its Mediterranean-style architecture, Coral Gables is home to a number of sensitively designed franchises. Coral Gables has a city-wide design review ordinance and uses incentives to encourage Mediterranean-style design. Developers who respect local architectural traditions can receive increased floor/area ratios, increased height or lot coverage, relaxed setback requirements, and additional units in buildings.



*Burger King in Mediterranean-style building. Coral Gables, FL.*

To assist applicants, the city provides prospective developers with a set of design guidelines and encourages preliminary review of all proposals to avoid problems. Planning Director Walter Carlson says that "design controls in Coral Gables have resulted in numerous economic benefits including: higher property values, lower vacancy rates, and faster sales of both residential and commercial buildings."

### 6. New Hyde Park, New York

This small Long Island town may have the only McDonald's in America where prospective brides pose for their bridal portrait on the stairs to the dining mezzanine. In 1992 McDonald's acquired a rundown Greek Revival Mansion, intending to demolish it and

build one of its standard eateries. But New Hyde Park residents negotiated an agreement with McDonald's to restore the house, built in 1860, to its original appearance — with allowance for an architecturally compatible rear addition. Today, the town is happy and the 140 seat restaurant is highly profitable.



*McDonald's in 1860 mansion. New Hyde Park, NY.*

### 7. Independence, Ohio

New Hyde Park is not the only community that can boast of a two story Greek Revival McDonald's. The small town of Independence, Ohio can too! The major difference is that the Independence McDonald's is housed in a new building. The Greek Revival-style McDonald's constructed in 1987 resulted from negotiations between the town planning board and McDonald's officials. Perhaps not surprisingly there are several other unique McDonald's in Northeastern Ohio, including an award winning "Western Reserve" style eatery in Hudson.

### 8. Ft. Collins, Colorado

Communities already saturated with fast-food outlets in cookie cutter buildings may



*Taco Bell in restored house. Ft. Collins, CO.*

think it's too late to achieve contextual design. However, Ft. Collins, Colorado, shows it's never too late to strengthen community identity. When Taco Bell sought to replace their existing twenty year old eatery with a larger model, Ft. Collins saw the opportunity to get the real thing instead of "Santa Fake." The company originally proposed to demolish a large Spanish Colonial Revival home built in 1930. The home, with its red barrel tile roof, ornate wooden modillions, round arch windows, and Mission-style chimney, was next door to the original Taco Bell and on the edge of a row of vintage houses.

The city proposed the adaptive reuse of the house for conversion into a restaurant. After all, the Spanish-Mission architecture of the house reflected Taco Bell's own corporate Santa Fe-style. Taco Bell initially rejected the proposal, but subsequent negotiations led to the adaptation of the existing house with a sensitively designed rear addition for the kitchen and a drive-thru lane. The new Taco Bell has won several awards — and is among the top grossing Taco Bells nationwide.



*New "Greek Revival" McDonald's. Independence, OH.*

## Fast Food Restaurant Design

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a homogenized landscape of banal buildings, garish signs, and surpassing ugliness. Red roofs, golden arches, plastic Kentucky colonels punctuated by parking lots and pole signs are now familiar sights all over America. As Kunstler puts it: "The landscape..... is littered with cartoon buildings and commercial messages. We whiz by them at fifty-five miles an hour and forget them. There is little sense of having arrived anywhere, because everywhere looks like no place in particular."

The truth is the places most Americans hold dearest are almost always the places that are true to themselves. They have a unique local or regional character. They do not look or feel quite like anyplace else.

Preserving a town's unique character strengthens its social and psychological well-being. It fosters a sense of community pride. It is also very good for business. In fact, many of the fast-food restaurants featured here attract sightseers and tourists, as well as diners. They are proof that fast-food franchises can be a magnet for devotees of architecture and history as well as of burgers and fries.

Facing growing competition and a saturated domestic marketplace, fast-food chains are now experimenting with radical changes in location, decor, food, and service. There is now a greater willingness to



Burger King in new building. Chesterfield Courthouse, VA.

forgo plastic, one-size-fits-all architecture in favor of structures that are more compatible with their surroundings. Today, there are numerous examples of compatible fast-food franchises in both new and existing buildings. See pages 10-11. Not surprisingly, communities that demand site-specific architecture have discovered that design controls and profits can coexist.



Burger King in restored row structure. Washington, DC.

## SUMMING UP:

There is no economic or legal reason why every community cannot have corporate design that respects local identity. National companies want access to profitable markets, but they also want to be good neighbors. If they are asked to address local architectural, landscaping or historic preservation concerns they usually will.

When franchises insist on placing corporate interest over public interest, communities can use a variety of techniques to foster compatibility. However, with or without legal tools, no community should forget the power of public opinion. Many of the buildings featured here grew out of public calls for a site specific design or for saving a cherished building.

Image conscious fast-food franchises are now much more willing to consider architectural changes that respect local identity. This is because both communities

and corporations are beginning to recognize the economic benefits of historic preservation, design review, and high quality development. ♦

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### Additional Resources:

*Saving Face: How Corporate Franchise Design Can Respect Community Identity*, by Ronald Lee Fleming. Townscape Institute, 2 Hubbard Park, Cambridge, MA 02138; (617) 491-8952. This book provides a comprehensive look at how communities can advocate for franchise designs that respect traditional architectural character. It includes case studies and color photos.

Need a copy of a fast-food company's annual corporate report? Contact Ed McMahon at the Conservation Fund, (703) 525-6300, for a list of addresses and phone numbers.

## Things to Know About Fast-Food Restaurants

**1. Building Design** - Experience shows that if you're willing to accept the standard, "cookie-cutter" design, that's what you'll get. On the other hand, if your community insists on a customized, place-responsive building, *that's* what you're likely to get. The bottom line for most fast-food companies is securing access to good trade areas. They evaluate locations based on their strategic location and economic potential. If they are required to address local historic or architectural concerns, they will usually do so. Hundreds of local communities have successfully worked with national fast-food chains to get buildings that respect local community identity.

**2. Playgrounds** - Fast-food chains sometimes insist on building a large playground in front of their building. If this is inappropriate for your site, stand firm. There are thousands of highly profitable fast-food restaurants without gaudy outdoor playgrounds. In Charlottesville, Virginia, for example, the new Colonial-style McDonald's includes an *indoor* playground. This has the advantage of being available to children all seasons of the year, good weather or bad.

**3. Drive-Thrus** - Americans love to drive, so it is no surprise that businesses offering drive-thru facilities are so popular. Banks, laundries, photo supply dealers, and fast-food outlets are just a few of the places where Americans conduct business without leaving their car. However, given the pedestrian orientation of most downtowns and neighborhood commercial areas, fast-food drive-thrus present both urban design and safety problems.



McDonalds in existing building. Ft. Lauderdale, FL

First, recognize that drive-thrus are not essential to a successful fast-food restaurant. There are many profitable fast-food eateries without drive-thrus. Franchises sometimes argue that drive-thrus are a necessity because they can account for over 50 percent of a restaurant's total business. This argument is misleading. While many franchises do receive up to 50 percent of their business from drive-thrus, this does not mean that restaurants without drive-thrus receive 50 percent less business. The total number of customers is often comparable, only the point of sale is different.

Where drive-thrus are permitted, it is important to separate the drive-thru lanes from circulation lanes. This ensures access to exits and parking spaces without having to wait in line behind cars in the drive-thru lane. Drive-thrus should also be designed to minimize conflicts with pedestrians and to prevent congestion near intersections.

**4. Signs** - Obtrusive signage is often the most objectionable aspect of fast-food restaurants. Fast-food outlets are frequently announced by garish, oversized signs. And the "copy-cat" logic of corporate competition often results in unsightly clutter: portable signs, pole signs, exit signs, plastic pennants, flapping flags, and twirling streamers all shouting for attention. Sign clutter is ugly, costly, and ineffective. On the other hand, when signs are controlled, merchants do a better job of selling, at less cost, because shoppers can now see what they're looking for. A good sign code is pro-business because an attractive shopping district will attract more customers than an ugly one.

Sign control is particularly important in small towns, neighborhood commercial areas, and other pedestrian-oriented locations. Signs should be in proportion to the building to which they are attached. Freestanding signs should never be taller than the building to which they relate. The trend is toward low monument-style signs. Many communities also regulate the materials used to construct signs, typically prohibiting plastic, internally illuminated signs, while encouraging signs constructed of wood, stone, or other natural materials.

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