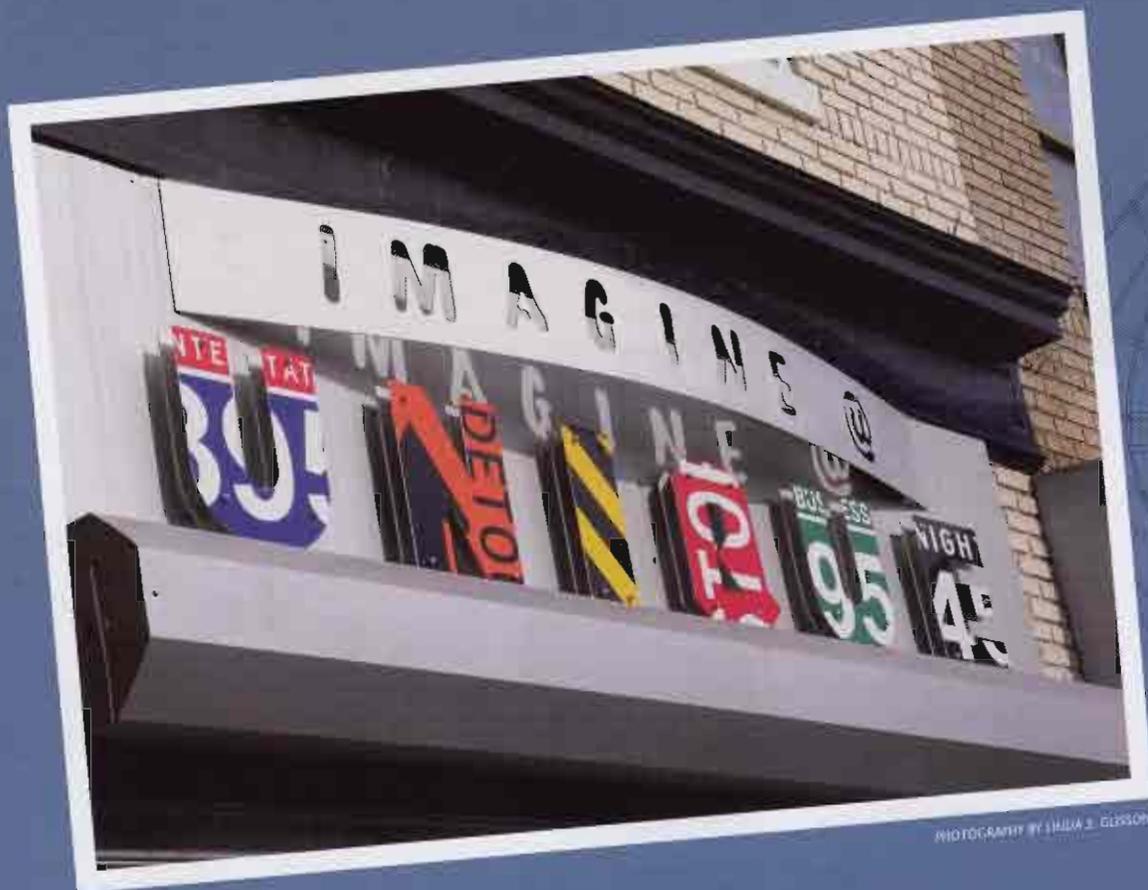


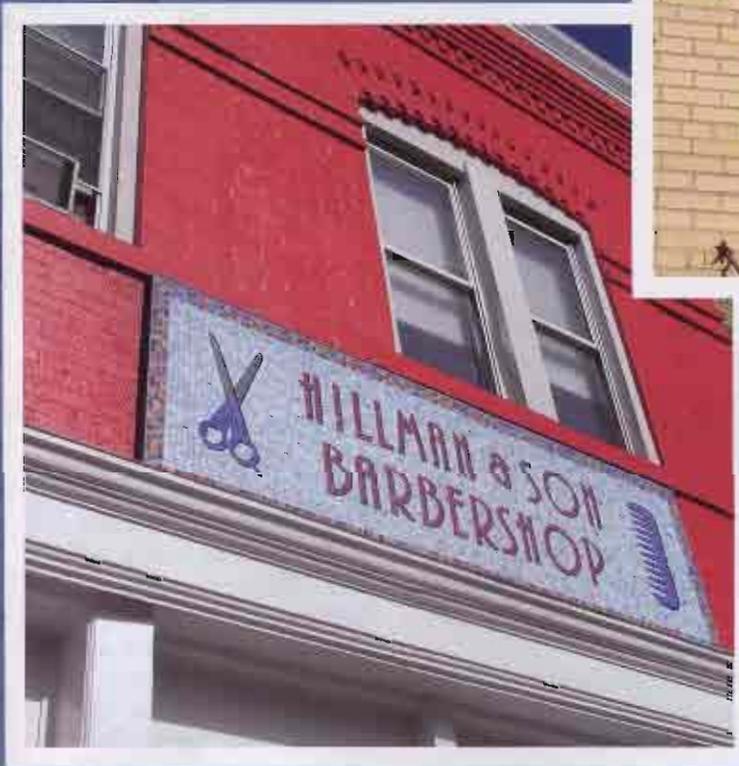
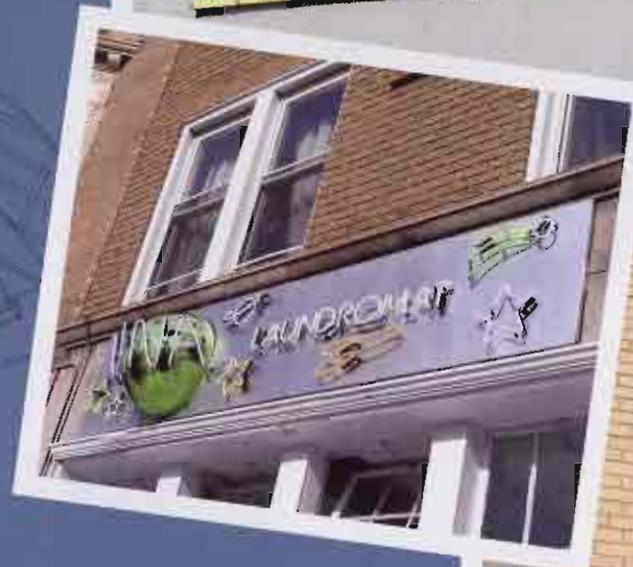
SIGNS, SIGNS, EVERYWHERE ARE SIGNS

TURNING SIGNS INTO BUSINESS-GENERATING WORKS OF ART
BY ANDREA DONO



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIMMIE S. GLEASON

H Street Main Street in Washington, D.C., is capitalizing on the important messages signs can send to customers by helping local business owners add pizzazz to their buildings through the "H Street NE Expressive Signs Project." Blending creativity and good business sense, this program teams business owners with local artists to conceptualize, fabricate, and install attractive and appropriate signs to add personality to the district and increase foot traffic.



» "These signs are really different; everybody loves them," says Tim Lewis, executive director of H Street Main Street. "They range from mirror mosaics to signs that look like sculptures with neon elements as well as stained glass."

The Expressive Signs project was an idea that came out of the city's strategic development plan to help the local business owners of this neighborhood business district. Derrick Woody, then the revitalization planning project manager for the Washington D. C. Office of Planning, was looking for ways to spur business and property owners to improve the aesthetic appeal and make design improvements along the corridor.

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» “My thinking was that many signs in most of the retail districts in Washington, D.C., are boring and don’t reflect the character of local businesses,” says Woody. “It seemed like a good idea to pair local artists with local business owners to create signs that are more suitable to the businesses than your regular vinyl sign with a Times New Roman font.”

Hoping to take bland out of the District, as well as to use attractive signage to positively impact businesses, Woody took the idea to the District of Columbia Commission on the Arts and Humanities (DCCA), which agreed to fund the \$7,000 grants for each artist to produce a sign. Joining DCCA as partners in the project were the Office of Planning, ReSTORE DC, and the H Street Main Street program.

“The Main Street program was responsible for marketing the project, which involved a lot of going door to door to discuss it with business owners,” says Lewis. Main Street also worked with the Office of Planning to hold seminars to teach local business owners the strong impact a good sign can have on business as well as to demystify the application process.

Applicants were asked to meet several conditions before applying for the grant. First, they had to agree to maintain sufficient insurance coverage for the sign as well as personal liability coverage for the project. After the sign is installed, they must properly maintain it

for at least five years. During that time, they must also seek approval should they want to make any changes. Business owners must also keep their property in good shape, be current with all taxes, and agree to let the city promote their sign. They were asked to submit a copy of their lease (which had to have at least five years remaining) and a color photo of their building, along with permission from the building owner.

“It was hard to get a lot of people on board initially,” says Lewis. “There were a lot of bad feelings among business owners stemming from failed projects that occurred before we got here. We had to convince them that this wasn’t just another project that wasn’t going to come through in the end. Once the buzz got out, people were excited.”

Twenty business owners and 40 local artists applied to participate in the project. Only 14 businesses qualified, however, and since the program allowed a maximum of 15 businesses, all were selected. A preference was given to business owners who met the following conditions: their tax payments were up to date, their business was supported by a recently written business plan, their facades and interior layouts were in good condition, and their business occupied the first floor of the building.

“One of the biggest challenges was for the business owners to get the necessary documents in order for the

signs to be permitted,” says Woody. “Some businesses were operating without Certificates of Occupancy and needed to get those first. Also, the artists needed to get permits and learn the regulatory process, which is something most of them never had to deal with before.”

A design committee made up of representatives from the project’s partners selected a pool of talented local artists. Business owners were paired with these artists on a lottery basis. From that point on, the business owners and the artists worked together to create the sign. The artists looked at the business concept, building architecture, color scheme, and atmosphere to create the most appropriate design; they didn’t want the signs to just be a bunch of letters without creativity or feeling.

The teams also had to make sure the building owner consented to the project and that the sign did not harm the building in any way. If the business owner couldn’t get the landlord on board, Lewis would step in to explain how the signs would improve the look of the building, as well as the appearance of the entire district, and how participation was a win-win situation for all stakeholders. The final step was approval from the design committee, after which the teams could move forward with their ideas.

For many business owners, working with an artist was a new experience. Khadijah

Bronson, owner of the Philadelphia Water Ice Company, admitted there was a disconnect between the artist and herself. “I wanted the word Philadelphia to be bigger because that is where the name recognition comes from,” says Bronson. “Instead Water Ice is emphasized and not many people know what that is.” Despite that problem, she is getting a lot of compliments on her mirrored mosaic sign and is looking forward to an increase in business during the warmer months when people are looking for cold, sweet treats.

Clothing retailer Leon Robbins agrees that working with an artist was a different experience for him. “As a business man I would be inclined to hire an artist and just say ‘do it.’ But there is more to the creative process than that,” says Robbins. “DCCA walked me through the process and it ultimately went smoothly. It was a great experience and the resulting sign is terrific. I get a lot of great feedback on it.”

Robbins notes that the sign hasn’t actually had a direct impact on sales just yet. “A lot of my customers are driven by price and they aren’t motivated by a cool sign,” says Robbins. “But there are so many commuters that drive past here every day. I think these signs might help them slow down and maybe get out of their cars and shop along H Street. It is more about getting people here. Whether they shop with me or one of the other busi-



BEFORE



AFTER

Retailer Leon Robbins, owner of Stan's Discount Clothing on H Street in Washington, D.C., gets a lot of compliments on the colorful metal sign (above right) that has replaced the standard vinyl, box-lit sign (above left) that used to hang above his storefront.

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nesses here, it will be good for the entire neighborhood. It will be good for H street.”

In the spring, Main Street plans to hold a publicity event to celebrate the completion of the signs project. At the same time, the program plans to roll out a significant facade improvement program that could help the buildings show off the signs better. Lewis named improved lighting as

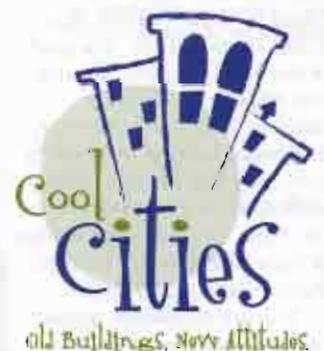
an example of one such facade enhancement. The District government is also looking into ways to fund this program so other DC Main Streets communities can add some sizzle to their signs.

“A lot of these signs are turning out to cost more than \$7,000, and many of the artists are bearing the burden of the excessive costs simply because they want to get their

work out there,” says Lewis.

He says the projects are in various stages of completion but all are coming out great.

“We think the signs will improve business and generate increased pedestrian traffic,” says Lewis. “We want people to walk by and say, ‘wow, that is a cool sign, let’s go inside to check it out.’”



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