

Saint Paul Heritage Preservation Commission  
 Department of Planning and Economic Development  
 25 West Fourth Street, Suite 1400  
 Saint Paul, MN 55102  
 Phone: (651) 266-9078

## HERITAGE PRESERVATION COMMISSION DESIGN REVIEW APPLICATION

This application must be completed in addition to the appropriate city permit application if the affected property is an individually designated landmark or located within an historic district. For applications that must be reviewed by the Heritage Preservation Commission refer to the HPC Meeting schedule for meeting dates and deadlines.

### 1. CATEGORY

Please check the category that best describes the proposed work

- |  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Repair/Rehabilitation | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Sign/Awning | <input type="checkbox"/> New Construction/Addition/<br>Alteration |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Moving                | <input type="checkbox"/> Fence/Retaining Wall   | <input type="checkbox"/> Pre-Application Review Only              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Demolition            | <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____            |   |

### 2. PROJECT ADDRESS

Street and number: 882 West 7th Zip Code: 55102

### 3. APPLICANT INFORMATION

Name of contact person: Ed Johnson  
 Company: Way 7th Federation  
 Street and number: 974 West 7th  
 City: St. Paul State: MN Zip Code: 55102  
 Phone number: (651) 319-3669 e-mail: eds dot way7th dot org

### 4. PROPERTY OWNER(S) INFORMATION (If different from applicant)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Street and number: \_\_\_\_\_  
 City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Phone number: (\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_ e-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

**5. PROJECT ARCHITECT (If applicable)**

Contact person: \_\_\_\_\_  
Company: \_\_\_\_\_  
Street and number: \_\_\_\_\_  
City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code: \_\_\_\_\_  
Phone number: (\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_ e-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

**6. PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

Completely describe ALL exterior changes being proposed for the property. Include changes to architectural details such as windows, doors, siding, railings, steps, trim, roof, foundation or porches. Attach specifications for doors, windows, lighting and other features, if applicable, including color and material samples.

Federataw has submitted a sign application for the use of the structures located at Johnson / West 7<sup>th</sup> — in the Schmidt Historic District.

*Attach additional sheets if necessary*

**7. ATTACHMENTS**

Refer to the *Design Review Process sheet* for required information or attachments.  
**\*\*INCOMPLETE APPLICATIONS WILL BE RETURNED\*\***

**ARE THE NECESSARY ATTACHMENTS AND INFORMATION INCLUDED?**

YES

Will any federal money be used in this project? YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO   
Are you applying for the Investment Tax Credits? YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO

I, the undersigned, understand that the Design Review Application is limited to the aforementioned work to the affected property. I further understand that any additional exterior work to be done under my ownership must be submitted by application to the St. Paul Heritage Preservation Commission. Any unauthorized work will be required to be removed.

Signature of applicant: [Signature] Date: 2/22/16  
 Signature of owner: [Signature] Date: 2/22/16

**FOR HPC OFFICE USE ONLY**

Date received: 2.25.16 FILE NO. 16-023  
 District: Brew /Individual Site: \_\_\_\_\_  
Contributing Non-contributing/Pivotal/Supportive/: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Type of work: Minor/Moderate/Major

\_\_\_\_ Requires staff review

Supporting data: YES NO  
 Complete application: YES NO

The following condition(s) must be met in order for application to conform to preservation program:

**It has been determined that the work to be performed pursuant to the application does not adversely affect the program for preservation and architectural control of the heritage preservation district or site (Ch.73.06).**

\_\_\_\_\_  
 HPC staff approval  
 Date \_\_\_\_\_

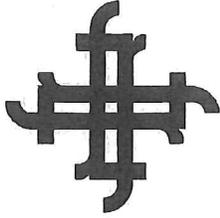
Requires Commission review

Submitted:

- 3 Sets of Plans
- 1 Set of Plans reduced to 8 1/2" by 11" or 11" by 17"
- Photographs
- City Permit Application
- Complete HPC Design Review application

Hearing Date set for: \_\_\_\_\_

City Permit # \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_



**West 7th/Fort Road Federation**  
974 West 7th Street  
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55102

651-298-5599  
FortRoadFederation.org

March 3, 2016

882 West 7<sup>th</sup> Sign Variance  
882 West 7<sup>th</sup> HPC Application

The variance seeks to install signs on two existing structures that are part of the Schmidt Historic District. The variance request is 895 SF variance.

The Schmidt Historic District was established by the city of Saint Paul in 2011. The sign structures in question were deemed a contributing structures to the historical and architectural quality of the historic district in the nomination submission. The sign structure was installed post WWII. Therefore, the sign structures will always be a part of the historic district.

Historically, the signage on the structures promoted beers brewed at the Schmidt Brewery, principally Grain Belt. Between the two sign structures is a large beer bottle denoting Grain Belt Beer.

The land in which the signs are located serves as the parking lot for the Rathskeller building, which is being developed by the Federation.

The Federation will lease the sign structure to businesses that occupy space in the buildings and properties owned by the Federation. In the past Dominion installed signs to market the Schmidt Artist Lofts during the construction and lease up period of their project. The Federation also installed signs marketing the GermanFest in 2014 and 2015 and then leased the signage space to Schell's Brewery during other times of the year since they participate in the GermanFest.

The signs will be made of polyethylene. Paper poster sign material is no longer a preferred use because the new material is fully recyclable, lighter, longer lasting and easier to install.

Going forward, the Federation intends to lease the sign structure for the GermanFest event in May and June of 2016. For the remainder of the year, the Federation will lease the sign to Schell's Brewery.

The community response to the leasing of these structures was met with wide support. The reuse of the structure was seen as a visual improvement to the site versus the "unsigned" previous structure.

The signs are part of the Schmidt Historic District. The Schmidt Historic District and resulting development are part of the Comprehensive Plan and are in keeping with the general character of the neighborhood.

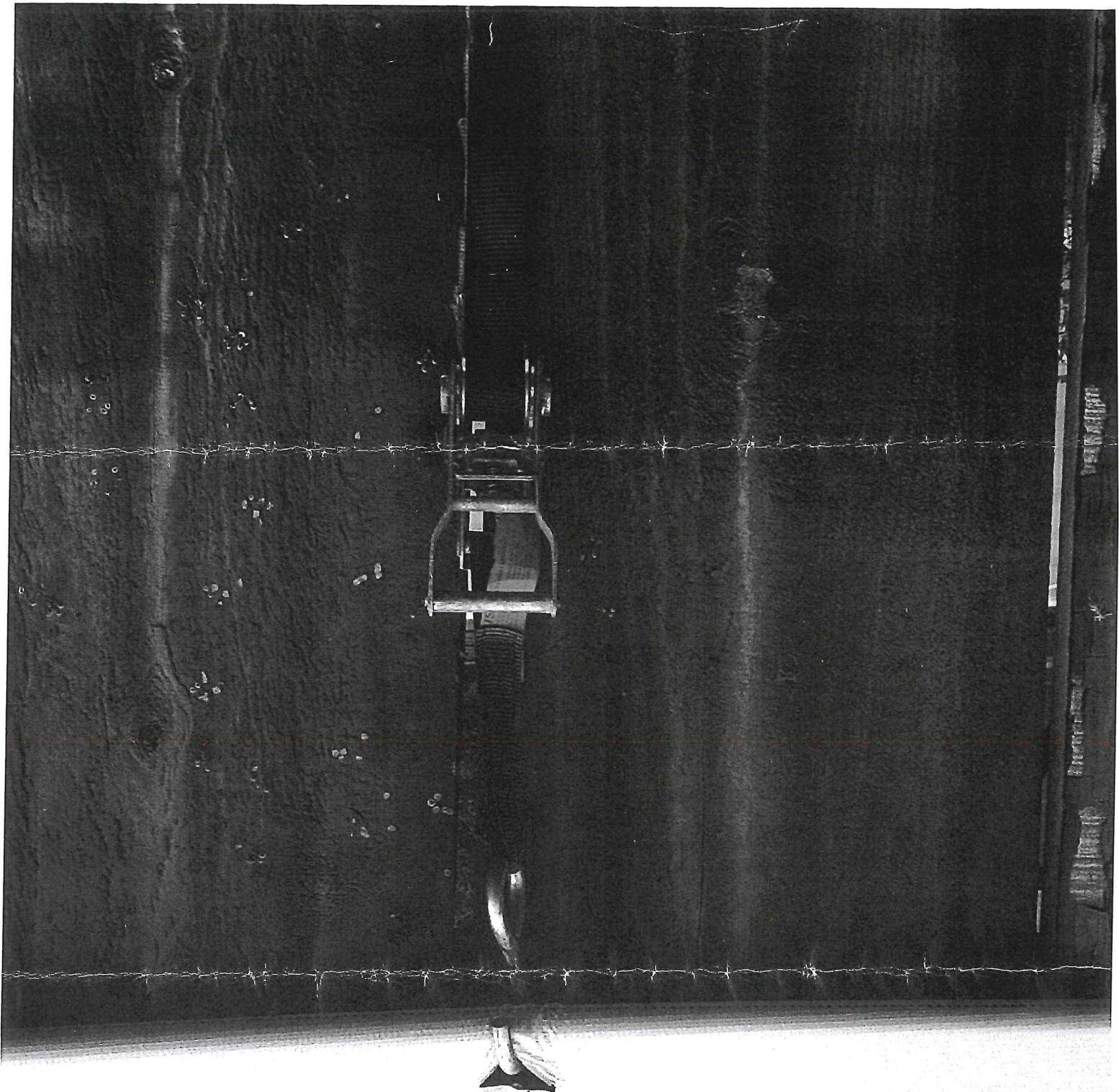
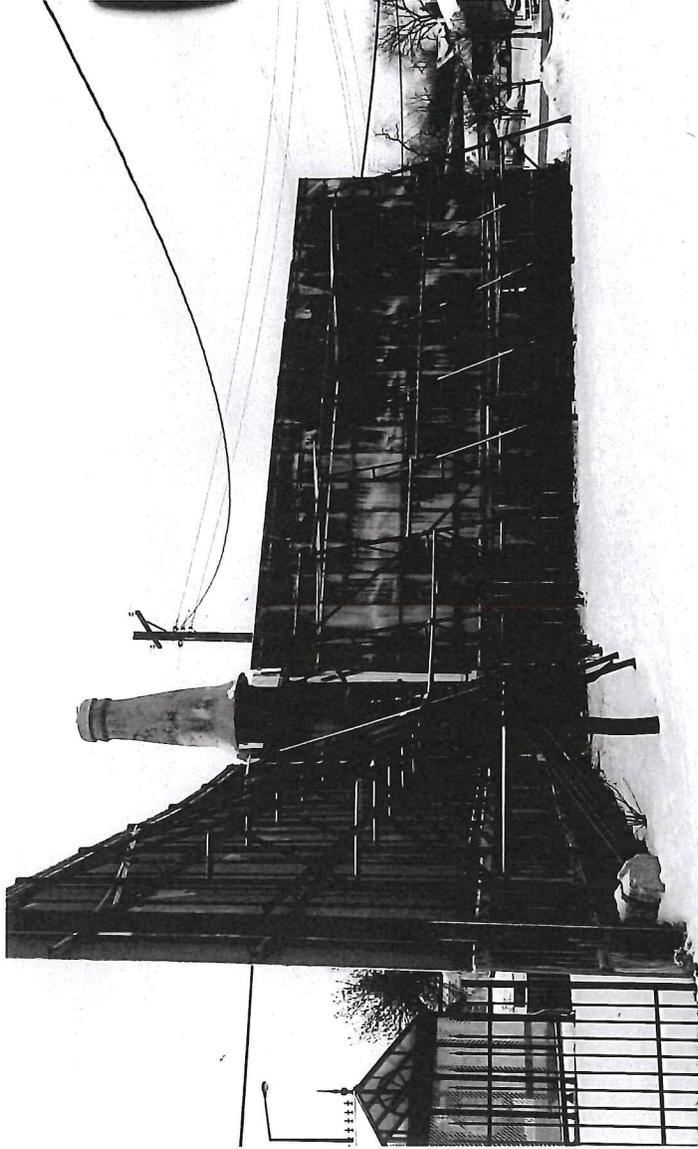


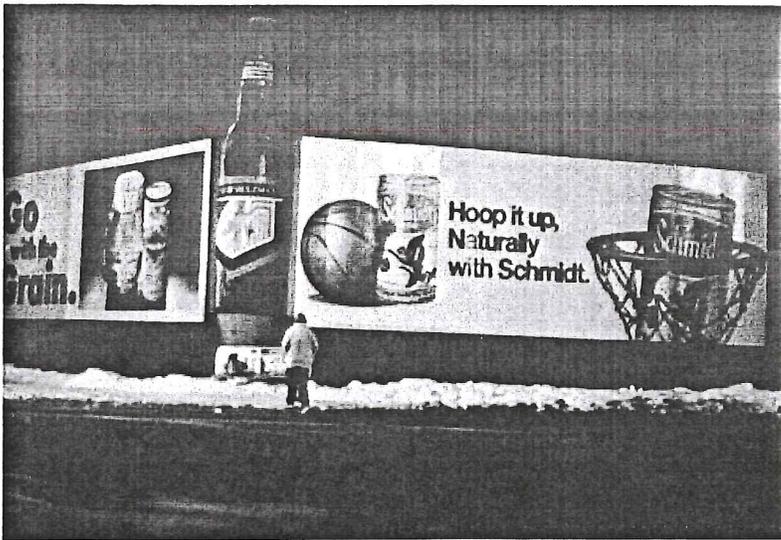
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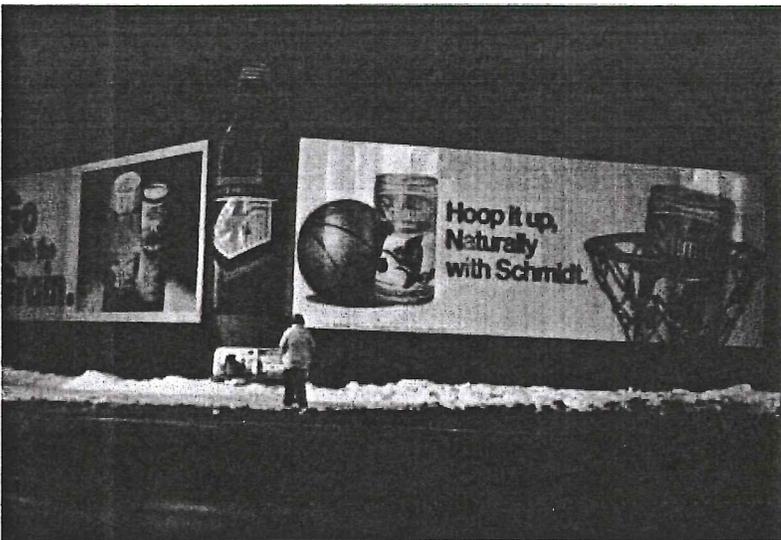
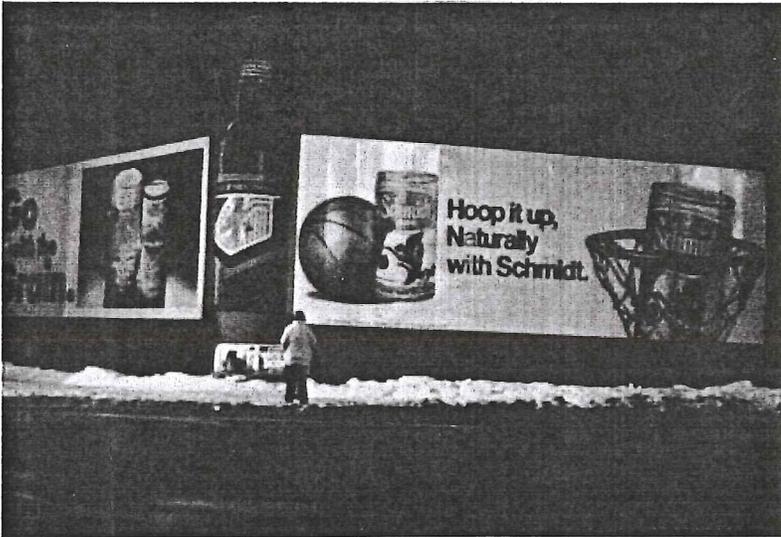
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Not dated.

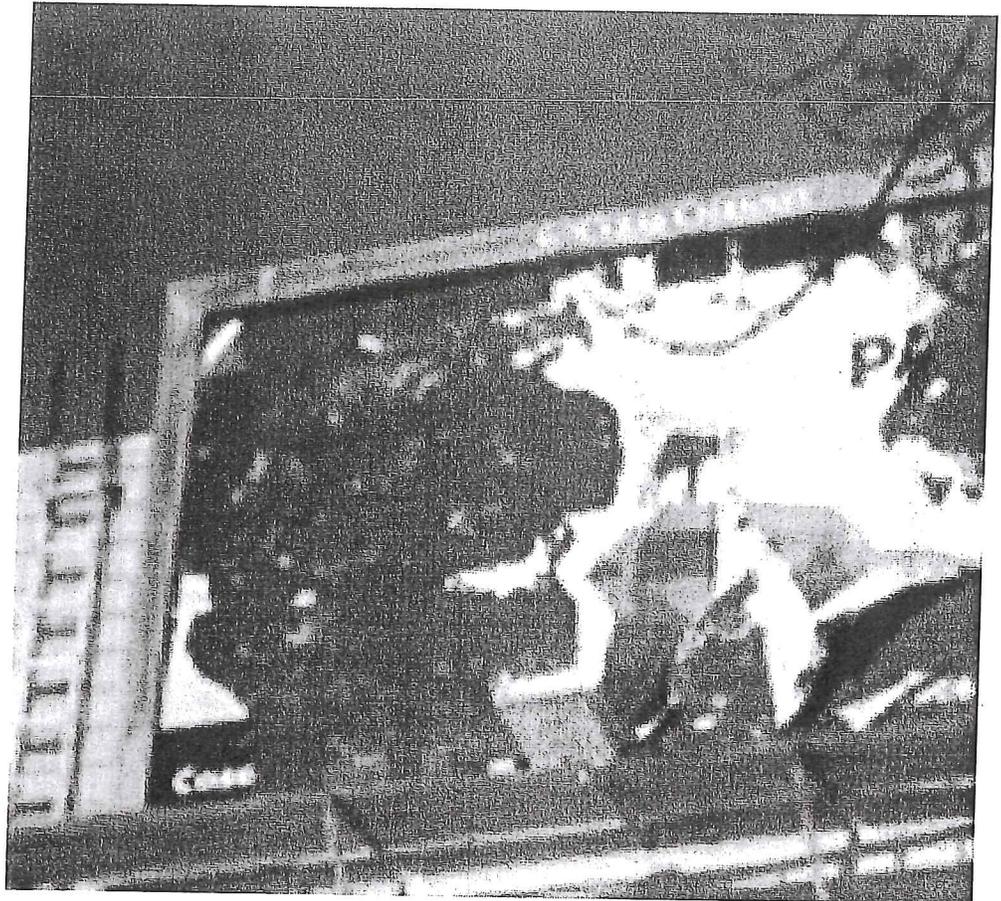


MNHHS photo  
dated 1979



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This month marks the end of the paper poster for the billboard industry.

Last year the Outdoor Advertising Association of America announced a commitment to eliminate paper poster billboards (poster is the term for smaller-sized billboards), and the biggest billboard companies have switched to material that is fully recyclable, lighter, longer-lasting and easier to install.

The new billboard poster base material is polyethylene (PE), and the posters are installed by stretching them across billboard holders and attaching them with special pockets, opposed to gluing up paper posters, also called "30-sheets," as reference to how many paper they use.

The 220,000 billboard posters across the U.S. used to be made up of paper and paste, creating about 150 million pounds of waste a year. The PE posters weigh four pounds, opposed to the 40 pounds of material needed for a paper poster. The PE posters are also more water resistant and provide better print quality, according to outdoor advertising companies like Clear Channel.

However, they also cost one-and-a-half or two times as much as paper posters, but they last three times as long, if they stay up for 90 days, the cost evens out.

As for disposal, Circle Graphics, the maker of recyclable PE Eco-Posters, has a partnership with recycler Avangard Innovative to turn the used billboards into plastic railroad ties.

Clear Channel Outdoor, CBS Outdoor, and Lamar Advertising, which altogether account for 65 percent of the country's billboard posters, have all made efforts to transition.

Lamar started switching to PE posters in mid-2008 and also planned to convert all vinyl billboards to recyclable materials as well. And starting on April 1, Clean Channel Outdoor is only accepting Circle Graphics' Eco Posters.

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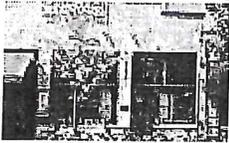
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FROM THE JUNE 2015 SAINT PAUL MAGAZINE ISSUE

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# Celebrate German Fest on West Seventh Street

German Fest returns for its second year on West Seventh Street.



PHOTO BY: COURTESY OF LINDA DERODE

After a huge success during its inaugural year of 2014, [German Fest](http://www.germanfestmn.org/) (<http://www.germanfestmn.org/>) on West Seventh Street comes back to the historic Schmidt's Brewery in Saint Paul for another weekend celebration of Minnesota's German heritage and traditions.

"We had a fabulous event last year, with more than 20,000 people in attendance over three days," says Linda DeRoode, director of festivals at [FILO Productions Inc.](http://www.filoproductions.com/) (<http://www.filoproductions.com/>), hosts of the event. "German Fest is dedicated to showcasing German culture in the state of Minnesota." Kevin Weinhandl, FILO president, calls it his mission to give back to the Saint Paul and Minnesota communities with a "cultural event of all things German."

Returning for the 2015 German Fest is the popular strong man competition, with new perks and challenges for spectators of all ages, as well as the outdoor performance stage, "featuring continuous entertainment, most commonly in the form of traditional German music," DeRoode says. Also on site will be eight local restaurants serving authentic German cuisine, as well as food trucks from popular non-German establishments.

New events and activities this year include human foosball and the highly anticipated Saint Paul Firefighters' lederhosen calendar sale, with all proceeds going toward Saint Paul Firefighters' Operation Warm, bringing warm winter coats to local students in need.

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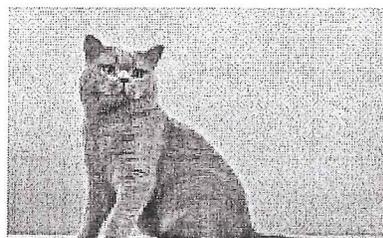
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## HISTORY OF OOH

OOH advertising can trace its lineage back to the earliest civilizations. Thousands of years ago, the Egyptians employed tall stone obelisks to publicize laws and treaties. While modes of advertising have changed over the centuries, OOH advertising is still a relevant form of communication today.



### The Early Years

In 1450, Johannes Gutenberg invented movable type printing, and advertising in the modern era was launched in the form of the handbill. The lithographic process was perfected in 1796 which gave rise to the illustrated poster.

Gradually, measures were taken to ensure exposure to posters was sustained for fixed periods of time. This led to bill posters erecting their own structures in order to offer more desirable locations where vehicular and pedestrian traffic was heaviest.

### 1830's: The Origin of US Billboards

In the beginning, American roadside advertising was generally local. Merchants painted signs or glued posters on walls and fences to notify the passersby that their establishments up the road sold horse blankets, rheumatism pills, and other useful items.

The large format American poster (measuring more than 50 square feet) originated in New York when Jared Bell began printing circus posters 1835.



In 1850, exterior advertising was first used on street railways.

### 1860's: The Establishment of an American Industry

The earliest recorded leasings of billboard occurred in 1867.

By 1870 nearly 300 small sign-painting and bill posting companies were in operation.

In 1872, the International Bill Posters' Association of North America was formed in St. Louis.

### 1890's: A National Association is Formed

In 1891 the Associated Bill Posters' Association of the US and Canada was formed in Chicago. The name was later changed to the Outdoor Advertising Association of America (OAAA). The stated purpose of the



association was to promote a greater understanding of the poster medium, provide an expanded nationwide organization for coordinating the services offered by member companies, and to address the ethical concerns of early industry leaders.



Michigan formed the first state bill posters association in 1871, followed by Indiana, New York, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin, all of which had active state associations by 1891.

**1900's: Standardization**



In 1900, a standardized billboard structure was established in America, and ushered in a boom in national billboard campaigns. Confident that the same ad would fit billboards from coast to coast, big advertisers like Palmolive, Kellogg, and Coca-Cola began mass-producing billboards as part of a national marketing effort.

By 1912, standardized services were available to national advertisers in nearly every major urban center.

In 1913, the industry association established an education committee which served to encourage members to donate public service advertising. The practice of filling "open boards" with public service messages has continued to this day.

During periods of war, the industry has responded by supporting war efforts. In peacetime, public service advertising has supported causes that improve society.

The National Outdoor Advertising Bureau (NOAB) was formed in 1915 to serve the needs of advertising agencies and to regularly inspect billboards in the field.



In 1931 Outdoor Advertising, Inc. (OAI) was established to promote outdoor advertising. It later merged with OAAA. In the same year, Coca-Cola's holiday's billboard campaign featured what became the contemporary interpretation of Santa Claus.



**The Mid-Twentieth Century**

In 1925 the Poster Advertising Association and the Painted Outdoor Advertising Association joined to become the Outdoor Advertising Association of America (OAAA) combining the interests of posters and bulletins into one association.

In 1925 the first major merger of outdoor advertising assets took place. The Fulton Group and the Cusack Co. combined to become the General Outdoor Advertising Company (GOA).

In the mid-twenties, the first outdoor advertising company was listed on the New York Stock Exchange.



In February 1934, the industry established the Traffic Audit Bureau or Media Measurement (TAB) to provide advertisers with third party data about outdoor advertising audiences.



In 1942, OAAA introduces the OBIE Awards. The Coca-Cola "Yes Girl" design wins the first Best of Show Award.

In 1958, Congress passed the first federal legislation to voluntarily control billboards along interstate highways. The law was known as the Bonus Act because states were given bonus incentives to control signs.

In 1962, French outdoor company JCDcaux introduced the bus shelter. A popular outdoor venue since its debut, bus shelters are built at no cost to municipalities and rely on ad revenue for their upkeep.

On October 22, 1965 the Highway Beautification Act was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson. It controlled billboards on interstate and federal-aid primary highways by limiting billboards to commercial and industrial areas and by requiring states to set size, lighting and spacing standards and requiring just compensation for removal of lawfully erected signs.

In 1972, tobacco advertising was banned on broadcast media leaving print and outdoor as its most popular advertising venues.

In 1975, the Outdoor Advertising, Inc. (OAI) developed a campaign to measure billboards effectiveness. The concept featured Shirley Cochran, the newly crowned Miss America, on billboards that were displayed across the country. Her name recognition soared 940 percent after the campaign launched.



Also in the 1970's a group of billboard companies commissioned studies at MIT for the painting of bulletins by computer. This ultimately led to computerized painting on vinyl substrates.



In 1983, the industry appealed a San Diego anti-billboard ordinance all the way to the US Supreme Court. The court found the ordinance unconstitutional.

**1990's to the Present**

OOH companies offer an increasingly diverse selection of advertising formats including: billboards, street furniture, transit, alternative media, cinema, and digital place-based screens.

In 1990, OAAA members agree to limit placement of messages that advertise products and services that cannot be sold to minors.

In 1991, OAAA celebrated its Centennial Convention in Washington, DC

In 1994, the Institute of Outdoor Advertising, Inc. (OAI) merges with OAAA.

In 1999, an agreement between major tobacco companies and state attorneys general prohibited tobacco advertising on OOH structures.



In 2000, OAAA introduced the Out of Home Media Plan Awards. The Lloyd's Barbeque Company wins the first Out of Home Media Plan Award.

In 2001, the OAAA Convention scheduled to begin on September 11 in New York was cancelled as a result of the terrorist attacks that day. This marked the first time an OAAA convention had been cancelled.

In 2002, Arbitron and Nielsen began testing the feasibility of developing outdoor ratings.

In 2003, OAAA and TAB joined together to host the first combined Convention.

In 2005, the first digital billboards were installed.

In 2008, OAAA launched the Committee to Address Responsible Environmental Solutions (CARES)

In 2010, OAAA and TAB joined together permanently to host an annual combined conference. Also that year, TAB launched OOH Ratings.

In 2011, OAAA celebrated its 120th anniversary.

In 2012, the OOH industry launched a new brand position focused on innovation, ubiquity, and creative impact.

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## Billboard

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### Background

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Billboard is the common term used to describe a type of outdoor advertising found along major highways. This name is most frequently given to large steel-framed signs, which are mounted on poles 20-100 ft (6.1-30.5 m) above the ground. Most often, the sign is printed on large poster sheets, which are affixed to the face of the sign. These signs may also be equipped with a variety of special lighting and display effects. This type of sign is one component of a unique advertising medium that communicates to audiences on the go. Such promotions are also referred to as "out of home" advertising because the intended audience is usually in transit, and is always away from their homes. As recently as 25 years ago, 90% of outdoor advertising consisted of billboards. Today, the industry has expanded to include smaller signs on bus shelters, kiosks, and malls. There are over 500 companies nationwide that specialize in this type of advertising (although not all of them construct large road-side billboards.) The Federal Highway Administration estimates that in 1996 there were over 400,000 billboards on federally controlled roads, which generated revenues in excess of \$1.96 billion. According to Competitive Media Reporting the top 10 billboard revenue categories for 1996 included: entertainment and amusements; tobacco; retail; business and consumer services; automotive; travel, hotels and resorts; publishing and media; beer and wine; insurance (/knowledge/Insurance.html) and real estate; and drugs and remedies.

### History

Born out of necessity, billboards were probably first used to convey a message to the majority of individuals who were illiterate. The oldest known billboard ad was posted in the Egyptian city of Thebes over 3,000 years ago and offered a reward for a runaway slave. Prior to the late 1700s, the predecessor to the modern day billboard—billposting—was prevalent throughout Europe, but only as an informal source of information. It wasn't until the invention of lithography in the late eighteenth century that billboards as a medium expanded into an art form. The first art poster was created in 1871 by Englishman Frederick Walker, who was commissioned to create the playbill for the play "Lady in White" in London. By the early 1900s, schools for poster art were being formed and artists like Talouse Lautrec were making names for themselves.

The first large scale use of the billboard as an advertising tool was as circus posters printed or secured on horse-drawn trucks that would precede a show to town in order to increase interest and attendance. At this time, billboards were not standardized or controlled by any laws. During 1872-1912, organizations in the United States met to create billboard standards. Originally, the standard set was 24-sheet poster panels with a total size of 19.5 x 8.7 ft (6 x 2.6 m). Today, that size remains the same, while technology has reduced 24 sheets to 10.

It was also during the early 1900s that electric billboards were used to light up cities. Prior to the electric billboard, cities were dark, foreboding places. The electric billboard brought the cities to life at night, creating a more hospitable atmosphere that induced people to stay on the streets. Hence, the birth of nightlife.

By the late 1920s, more people were purchasing automobiles and traveling beyond the city. Billboard advertising expanded as well, and for the first time, billboard advertising had to consider a wider range of demographic audiences. Billboard art and design changed with the times, reflecting new technologies and the mood of a generation. With the use of photography and comics, billboards portrayed a world without problems during the depression of the 1930s. The 1950s gave rise to the hand-painted billboard and use of sexual innuendo in campaigns. Billboards were extensively used in China to promote Red Army politics. It was also during this time that billboard companies utilized the boom truck with a crane to move billboards and place them in more prominent positions. During the 1960s, celebrity endorsements became essential and the advent of the superstar was born. Focus shifted from the family to the singles lifestyle and the medium itself was emulated in the Pop Art movement. As interest in environmentalism (/knowledge/Environmentalism.html) increased during the late 1960s and early 1970s, billboard ads borrowed images from nature. It was at this time that the Marlboro man on horseback was born. In the 1970s and 1980s, campaigns used sexually explicit rather than implied themes. Objects were omnipotent and were created larger than life with little or no accompanying text.

## Design

Billboard design depends on such factors as location of the sign, the advertising budget, and the type of product being promoted. The industry uses market research firms to aid in the design process. These firms supply detailed information on the number of people in vehicles in different metropolitan regions, even projecting traffic patterns 10-15 years into the future. They can estimate the frequency and number of exposures the advertising will have upon its target audience. Using data generated by Global Positioning Systems (GPS), billboard location data can be merged with other geographic and demographic business information to create customized marketing solutions for outdoor advertisers. Computerized data analysis is available that incorporates census data, traffic origins, travel patterns, trading zones, competitor locations, and other key facts to help optimize the use and location of billboards.

The location of the billboard also helps determine the type of sign selected by the advertiser. The term billboard is actually a generic classification, referring to several types of signs. The most common forms are known as bulletins and poster panels. Bulletins, the largest sign style, may be as large as 20 x 60 ft (6.1 x 18.3 m) and are found in high-density traffic locations. They use computer or hand-painted messages as advertising artwork and are usually purchased for multi-month contract periods. Poster panels are somewhat smaller and are designated by the number of sheets employed on the sign. Thirty-sheet poster panels are approximately 12 x 25 ft (3.6 x 7.6 m) and are found on primary and secondary traffic ways. They are lithograph- or silkscreen-printed and are usually displayed for 30 days. Eight sheets are somewhat smaller (6 x 12 ft [1.8 x 3.6 m]) and are designed more for pedestrian and some vehicular traffic. They are placed in high-density urban neighborhoods and suburban shopping malls. The larger bulletin style is the most challenging type to construct.

## Components

Large billboards have three main components: steel used to construct and support the frame, artwork that conveys the advertising message, and electrical equipment for lighting and other special effects.

### Steel structure

Modern billboards, also known as monopoles, are supported by steel poles ranging from 36-72 in (91.4-183 cm) in diameter and up to 100 ft (30.5 m) tall. At the top of the mounting pole is a frame constructed from steel I-beams. This frame supports the artwork and lighting equipment. Standard sizes for a large steel frame assembly are 20 x 60 ft (6.1 x 18.3 m), 20 x 48 ft (6.1 x 14.6 m), or 10 x 36 ft (3 x 11 m). When a company is interested in constructing one of these signs, they contact a steel erection firm with expertise in billboard construction. Typically, a customer will seek bids from three or four competitive vendors. These bids estimate the cost of designing the sign as well as the materials, transportation, and labor used to construct it. Some smaller billboards may be available from the steel company as

stock items that are pre-made and stored in their warehouse awaiting a customer's order. Larger signs, or signs that have special design requirements like the ability to withstand severe weather or moving parts, must be custom ordered. After the design is finalized, the erection company orders the appropriate steel. Some common sizes and grades of steel are kept in stock and are quickly accessible. Unusual steel components, such as those designed for use in high wind conditions, must be specially ordered from the steel fabricators.

### Artwork

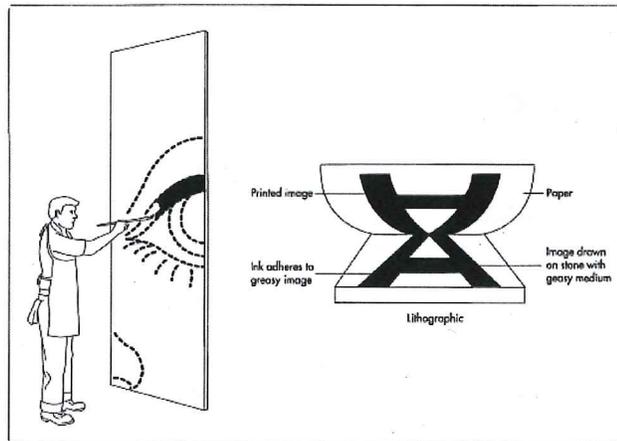
The steel frame is covered with a backing material, known as a facing. The artwork is affixed to the facing. The art is either preprinted on paper or vinyl sheets that are pasted onto the facing, or in some cases, the art is painted directly onto a plywood ([/knowledge/Plywood.html](#)) or canvas facing.

### Electrical systems

Most billboards are electrically lit and therefore require appropriate lighting and power systems along with a significant number of high wattage bulbs. Activation of these lighting systems is no simple matter. While many billboards are located in major metropolitan areas, others can be found in remote areas along interstates. In both cases, it is very impractical to have to travel to each sign every night to turn on the lights. Therefore, automatic switches have been developed to turn on the lights at specified times. Other systems use photosensitive cells to turn on the lights when dusk sets. Still other more advanced systems turn lights on and off electronically with a signal from a satellite ([/knowledge/Satellite.html](#)) system.

## The Manufacturing Process

Billboard manufacture requires three separate types of contractors. First, a steel erection

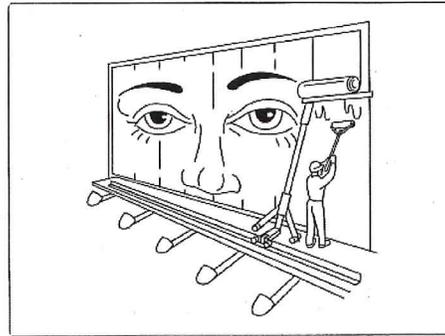


There are two types of billboards. Hand-painted billboards are usually used for small campaigns that want to create a special look. More often, billboards are produced from poster panels that are mass-produced copies of the original artwork.

firm is hired to install support pole and frame. Next, a company specializing in graphics creates and mounts the artwork, and finally electricians install the power and lighting.

### *Pre-assembly of structural components*

- 1 The steel erection company orders all the support components required for the job. Upon receipt of the components, they bolt and weld together as many pieces as possible before shipping them to the job site. Some of the longer steel pipes may be connected together as telescoping sections. Pre-assembly saves time on the job site and improves ease of shipping. The pre-assembled parts are then transported to the job site by truck.



Poster panels are pasted onto the billboard frame. Once the campaign is finished, the poster panels are covered with the next advertisements image. Hand-painted billboards are painted on plywood panels that are secured to the frame. Once the campaign is complete, the plywood panels are whitewashed in preparation for the next job.

### *Steel erection*

- 2 The job site must be properly prepared prior to installation of the steel. A subcontractor is typically assigned to drill a hole in the ground in which to place the support pole. Approximately 20-30 ft (6.1-9.1 m) deep, the hole is filled with concrete and the support pole is put into place.
- 3 Next, the frame is bolted into place on top of the pole which may be as little as 20 ft (6.1 m) or as much as 100 ft (30.5 m) above the ground. The term haggie is used to describe the distance from the sign face to ground level. The frame is equipped with catwalk-style walkways to allow access to the surfaces where the advertising elements are mounted. These catwalks may run along the front as well as the back of the sign with an access ladder located in the rear. The walkways are also built with attachments for safety cables used by the workers. The entire installation process takes a crew of three or four men approximately one week to complete.

### *Artwork fabrication*

The artwork is added after the structural elements are in place. The method of application depends on the design of the sign. Some advertisements are hand painted directly onto plywood sections that are directly attached to the billboard frame; others use lithographic ([/knowledge/Lithography.html](#)) prints prepared on large vinyl sheets, which are pasted onto the sign face. Usually, hand-painted billboards are used for small campaigns that want to achieve a higher quality look.

- 4 The pounce pattern technique is used to create a billboard-sized stencil of an original artwork. Using this technique, the artwork is projected onto a billboard-size sheet that is placed over a grounded copper mesh screen. Charcoal pencils with 500 volts of electricity passing through them transfer the enlarged image to the paper by creating pounce points.
- 5 Once attached to the plywood sections, the initial pattern of dots is defined further by charcoal dust. The charcoal is spread over the rough image, and it adheres to the points that were made by the electrically charged charcoal.
- 6 Artists work using a reducing glass to paint the enlarged version of the original. Oftentimes, several artists work on one billboard, each focusing on either the detailed images or the background. Mechanical scaffolding ([/knowledge/Scaffolding.html](#)) increases the artists' maneuverability.
- 7 Poster panels are printed on lithographic printers that mass produces the original artwork onto sheets of poster paper.
- 8 Once the campaign is completed, hand-painted panels are disassembled and whitewashed. Poster panels remain on the billboard where they are covered by the next ad campaign.

### *Electrical connection*

- 9 Typically, local electrical contractors are hired to install the power and lighting systems. In many cases, both sides of the sign are used for artwork, so lighting assemblies are required for both sides. In addition, the sign may require special wiring to operate moving parts or other special effects. All wiring must be done in accordance with relevant electrical codes.

## **(Quality Control**

There are no universal guidelines for billboard construction. Each company has its own proprietary standards. However, firms engaged in this type of work expend significant effort in repairing and maintaining the quality of the signs. These efforts are necessary due to the effects of weathering ([/knowledge/Weathering.html](#)) which causes deterioration of the sign components, particularly the paper and vinyl used to post the artwork. In addition, steel components can rust after extended exposure to the elements. Severe weather conditions can cause damage to signs that require more serious repairs.

In 1965, the Highway Beautification Act ([/knowledge/Highway\\_Beautification\\_Act.html](#)) was passed in the United States. It governs the amount, spacing, and quality of billboards placed along highways. As a result, many dilapidated frames were removed. In the late 1990s, cigarette manufacturers, who traditionally used billboards to advertise their products, made an agreement with the federal government in order to prevent total regulation of the industry. One of their concessions was to replace their ads with anti-smoking campaigns.

## **(Byproducts/Waste**

The processes used in billboard manufacture generate little usable byproducts or waste material. However, after a billboard has outlived

its usefulness a steel firm may be required to cut the sign down. In some cases, the components may be recycled for use in other jobs.

## ( The Future

Billboard manufacture is becoming increasingly sophisticated. More and more sign companies are taking advantage of computerized market research data to optimize the placement of their billboards. This trend is likely to continue as marketers continue to seek out the most effective advertising mediums. Bar coding technology is becoming a popular way of tracking information related to billboards. Some companies even videotape (/knowledge/Videotape.html) their signs and put together a computer display for their clients so they can just click on a location and see a picture or video of the billboard that is there. Satellite technology will also play a larger role in the billboard market of the future. Already satellite systems are being used to control lighting and to track sign locations.

However, perhaps the most interesting innovations in the industry are occurring in the area of advertising artwork. For example, one new type of sign uses a multi-faceted prismatic facing to actually deliver two different advertising messages. As the viewer approaches the sign, they see one picture, but as they pass the sign, their angle of view changes, revealing a different picture. This type of clever innovation continues to make billboards a popular and economically viable method of advertising.

## ( Where To Learn More

### Books

Henderson, Sally and Robert Landau. *Billboard Art*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1986.

### Other

Erected Steel Products. Steve McDowell, VP Operations. PO Box 360347, Birmingham, AL 35236. (205) 481-3700.

— Randy Schueller

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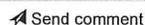
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Some of the web versions of the Preservation Briefs differ somewhat from the printed versions. Many illustrations are new and in color; Captions are simplified and some complex charts are omitted. To order hard copies of the Briefs, see [Printed Publications](#).

### PRESERVATION BRIEFS

# 25

## The Preservation of Historic Signs

Michael J. Auer

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### [Sign Regulation](#)

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Terra cotta wheel with Studebaker banner, 1926. Lakewood, Ohio. Photo: Frank Wrenick.

"Signs" refers to a great number of verbal, symbolic or figural markers. Posters, billboards, graffiti and traffic signals, corporate logos, flags, decals and bumper stickers, insignia on baseball caps and tee shirts: all of these are "signs." Buildings themselves can be signs, as structures shaped like hot dogs, coffee pots or Chippendale highboys attest. The signs encountered each day are seemingly countless, for language itself is largely symbolic. This Brief, however, will limit its discussion of "signs" to lettered or symbolic messages affixed to historic buildings or associated with them.

**Signs are everywhere. And everywhere they play an important role in human activity.** They identify. They direct and decorate. They promote, inform, and advertise. Signs are essentially social. They name a human activity, and often identify who is doing it. Signs allow the owner to communicate with the reader, and the people inside a building to communicate with those outside of it.

Signs speak of the people who run the businesses, shops, and firms. Signs are signatures. They reflect the owner's tastes and personality. They often reflect the ethnic makeup of a neighborhood and its character, as well as the social and business activities carried out there. By giving concrete details about daily life in a former era, historic signs allow the past to speak to the present in ways that buildings by themselves do not. And multiple surviving historic signs on the same building can indicate several periods in its history or use. In this respect, signs are like archeological layers that reveal different periods of human occupancy and use.

Historic signs give continuity to public spaces, becoming part of the community memory. They sometimes become landmarks in themselves, almost without regard for the building to which they are attached, or the property on which they stand. Furthermore, in an age of uniform franchise signs and generic plastic "box" signs, historic signs often attract by



Neon first appeared in signs in the 1920s, and reached its height of

their individuality: by a clever detail, a daring use of color and motion, or a reference to particular people, shops, or events.

popularity in the 1940s. Photo: Peter Phillips.

Yet historic signs pose problems for those who would save them. Buildings change uses. Businesses undergo change in ownership. New ownership or use normally brings change in signs. Signs are typically part of a business owner's sales strategy, and may be changed to reflect evolving business practices or to project a new image.

Signs also change to reflect trends in architecture and technology: witness the Art Deco and Depression Modern lettering popular in the 1920s and 1930s, and the use of neon in the 1940s and 1950s.

The cultural significance of signs combined with their often transitory nature makes the preservation of historic signs fraught with questions, problems, and paradoxes. If the common practice in every period has been to change signs with regularity, when and how should historic signs be kept? If the business is changing hands, how can historic signs be reused? The subject is an important one, and offers opportunities to save elements that convey the texture of daily life from the past.

This Brief will attempt to answer some of the preservation questions raised by historic signs. It will discuss historic sign practices, and show examples of how historic signs have been preserved even when the business has changed hands or the building itself has been converted to a new use.

## Historic Sign Types and Practices

### Pre-Nineteenth Century

American sign practices originated largely in Europe. The earliest commercial signs included symbols of the merchant's goods or tradesman's craft. Emblems were mounted on poles, suspended from buildings, or painted on hanging wooden boards. Such symbolic signs were necessary in a society where few could read, although verbal signs were not entirely unknown. A sheep signified a tailor, a tankard a tavern.

The red and white striped pole signifying the barbershop, and the three gold balls outside the pawnshop are two such emblems that can occasionally be seen today. (The barber's sign survives from an era when barbers were also surgeons; the emblem suggests bloody bandages associated with the craft. The pawnbroker's sign is a sign of a sign: it derives from the coat of arms of the Medici banking family.)

**Flat signs** with lettering mounted flush against the building gradually replaced hanging, symbolic signs. The suspended signs posed safety hazards, and creaked when they swayed in the wind: "The creaking signs not only kept the citizens awake at night, but they knocked them off their horses, and occasionally fell on them too." The result, in England, was a law in 1762 banning large projecting signs. In 1797 all projecting signs were forbidden, although some establishments, notably "public houses," retained the hanging sign tradition."<sup>(1)</sup>

By the end of the eighteenth century, the hanging sign had declined in popularity. Flat or flush-mounted signs, on the other hand, had become standard. Like symbolic signs, however, the tradition of projecting signs has survived into the present.

### Nineteenth Century Signs and Sign Practices

Surviving nineteenth-century photographs depict a great variety of signs. The list of signs discussed here is by no means exhaustive.

**Fascia signs**, placed on the fascia or horizontal band between the storefront and the second floor, were among the most common. The fascia is often called the "signboard," and as the word implies, provided a perfect place for a sign—then as now. The narrowness of the fascia imposed strict limits on the sign maker, however, and such signs usually gave little more than the name of the business and perhaps a street number.

Similar to fascia signs were signs between the levels of windows across the upper facade. Such signs were mounted on horizontal boards or painted on the building. Signs of this type tended to use several "lines" of text, the name of business and short description, for example. The message, reading from top to bottom, sometimes covered several stories of the building. Other **painted signs** presented figures, products, or scenes. Such signs were typically more vertical than horizontal in emphasis. Whether such painted signs featured text or images, they became major features of the building, as their makers intended them to be. The building itself often became a backdrop for the sign.



Once commonplace, the three balls symbolizing the pawnbroker are now rare. Photo: NPS files.

Signs in the form of **plaques, shields, and ovals** were used on many nineteenth-century buildings. Such signs had the advantage of being easily replaced as tenants came and went. They also easily incorporated images as well as lettering.

**Hanging or projecting signs**, both lettered and symbolic, were also common in the nineteenth century, although less so than previously. Projecting signs were often paired with another at a 45-degree angle for increased visibility. Occasionally a sign would stretch out from the building across the sidewalk, supported by a post at the street.

**Goldleaf signs**, and signs painted or etched on glass in windows, doors and transoms were quite common.

**Porcelain enamel signs** were also very popular in the latter half of the nineteenth century and into the mid-twentieth century. Signs carved from stone or wood also appeared frequently, especially on institutional buildings. Painted shutters and even window shades provided additional advertising space.

**Posters** found their way into display windows when they weren't pasted onto the building. Sidewalk signs or "sandwich boards" offered another chance to catch the eye of any passerby not watching the graphics overhead.

Nineteenth-century tenants looking for additional advertising space found it in unexpected places. They used the entrance steps to mount signs in a variety of ways: Handrails, risers, skirts, and balusters sported signs that gave businesses on upper levels a chance to attract notice.

**Awnings** offered other opportunities for keeping a name before the public. The fringe or skirt of the awning, as well as the panel at the side were the usual places for a name or street number. Flags, particularly hung from the upper floors, and banners, sometimes stretching across the sidewalk, also appeared on buildings.

**Rooftop signs** appeared with greater frequency in the second half of the nineteenth century than previously. Earlier rooftop signs tended to be relatively simple—often merely larger versions of the horizontal signs typically found on lower levels. Late in the century the signs became more ornate as well as more numerous. These later rooftop signs were typically found on hotels, theaters, banks and other large buildings.

The sign types described here were not used in isolation. Window and awning signs attracted sidewalk pedestrians and people in the street. Upper level signs reached viewers at greater distances. If signs were numerous, however, they were nonetheless usually small in scale.

As the century wore on, signs increased in size and scale. Wall signs several stories high were not uncommon in the second half of the century. This development reflects changes in urban life as the century headed to its close. Cities were experiencing rapid population growth. Buildings became bigger and taller. Elevated trains and electric trolleys increased the pace of city life. And when it comes to signs, speed alters scale. The faster people travel, the bigger a sign has to be before they can see it.

### Twentieth Century Signs and Sign Practices

The advent of the twentieth century approximately coincided with the coming of electricity, which gave signs light and, later, movement. Illuminated signs were not unknown before electricity. An advertisement printed about 1700 mentioned a night time sign lit by candles, and in 1840 the legendary showman P.T. Barnum built a huge sign illuminated by gas.<sup>2</sup> But electricity was safer and cheaper than candles, kerosene and gas. Its widespread use gave signs a prominence they retain today: illuminated signs dominate the streets at night.



In the 1930s and 1940s, signs built into storefronts became popular. This example is from Guthrie, Oklahoma. Photo: NPS files.

Electricity permitted signs to be illuminated by light shining onto them, but the real revolution occurred when lightbulbs were used to form the images and words on signs. Lightbulbs flashing on and off made new demands on the attention of passersby. Lightbulbs blinking in sequence could also simulate movement. Add this property to the mix, and a dramatic transformation of American streets resulted.

Moving signs were not unknown prior to the advent of electricity, for wind-driven signs had made their appearance in the nineteenth century. But electricity gave signs an unparalleled range of motion. This movement added yet another element to the life of the street.

**Neon** is another great twentieth-century contribution to the signmaker's art. "Neon," coined from the Greek word for "new," is a "new gas." It has the useful property of glowing when an electric charge passes through it. (Argon, krypton, xenon and helium



Objects associated with a business continue to be used as signs. Photo: NPS files.

share this property. Only neon and argon, however, are typically used in commercial signs.) Encased in glass tubes shaped into letters or symbols, neon offered signmakers an opportunity to mold light into an infinite variety of shapes, colors, and images. Combined with an electric timer, the neon tubing could present images moving in succession.

Neon first appeared in signs in the 1920s, and reached its height of popularity in the 1940s. The first documented neon commercial sign in the United States was at a Packard Motor Car dealership in Los Angeles in 1923.<sup>3</sup> After a period of decline, it underwent a renaissance, beginning in the 1970s. Artists experimented with neon as a conscious art-form, and several notable architects further helped in its revival.<sup>4</sup> Renewed interest in this colorful medium also sparked interest in preserving historic neon signs.

Along with such developments as the coming of electricity and then neon, stylistic movements influenced twentieth-century signs. In particular, Art Deco and Streamlined Moderne affected not just buildings, but their signs as well.

Architects working in these styles often integrated signs and buildings into a unified design. This was particularly true of storefronts built using pigmented structural glass, commonly known as "Carrara glass," and porcelain enamel on steel panels. These materials allowed words and images to be etched into the glass or enamel, or to be constructed in different colors and patterns as part of an overall design for the building. Such storefronts were popular from the 1920s into the 1940s.

As the century advanced, new styles took hold. The late 1950s brought signs with fins, star bursts, and other images reflecting a new fascination with outer space.



In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the country turned its attention to outer space, as in this example in Long Beach, California. Photo: Peter Phillips.

In the decades after World War II signs were also transformed by a group of materials now known generically as "plastic." Plastic had several advantages over wood, metal and other traditional sign materials. As the name indicates, "plastic" can take almost any shape. It can also take almost any color. Plastic is translucent. Lit from behind, it appears to glow. It is relatively durable. Above all, it is inexpensive, and can be mass produced. Plastic quickly became the dominant sign material.

Another profound influence on signs in this period stemmed from business trends rather than from technological breakthroughs or design movements: the rise of chain stores and franchises. National firms replaced many local businesses. Standard corporate signs went up; local trademarks came down. The rise of mass culture, of which the national chain is but one expression, has meant the rise of standardization, and the elimination of regional differences and local character.

The decline of gold-leafing and other traditional sign techniques contributed to these trends. Mass-produced signs have replaced local signs that differed from owner to owner and from signmaker to signmaker. The result is not just sameness, but impersonality as well: It is becoming rarer, for example, to find owners' names on signs. Whether the trend toward sameness can successfully be resisted is yet to be seen. (Some crafts, such as gold-leafing and porcelain enameling, for example, have experienced a revival of sorts.) But the preservation of historic signs is one way to ensure that at

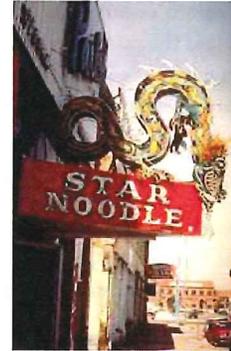
least some of these expressions of local history continue to enliven our streets.

## Sign Regulation

Historic commercial areas have customarily been a riot of signs. Yet if clutter has ample precedent, so do efforts to control it. Early attempts to regulate signs in this country include those of professional associations of advertisers, such as the International Bill Posters Organization of North America, founded in St. Louis in 1872.<sup>5</sup>

However, early efforts by municipalities to enact sign regulations met with disfavor in the courts, which traditionally opposed any regulatory effort based on aesthetic concerns. Early successes in the legal arena, such as the 1911 case, *St. Louis Gunning Advertising Company v. City of St. Louis*, were realized when proponents of sign controls argued that signs and billboards endangered public health and safety.

Yet gradually courts found merit in the regulation of private property for aesthetic reasons. In 1954 the U.S. Supreme Court handed down the landmark decision, *Berman v. Parker*, in which the court declared: "It is within the power of the legislature to determine that the community should be beautiful as well as healthy, spacious as well as clean, well balanced as well as carefully patrolled."<sup>6</sup>



This Ogden, Utah, sign is a superb example of neon. Photo: NPS files.

With the blessing of the courts, communities across the nation have enacted sign controls to reduce "urban blight." And where historic buildings are concerned, the growth of local review commissions has added to the momentum for controls in historic districts.

Typically, sign controls regulate the number, size and type of signs. In some cases, moving or projecting signs are prohibited. Often such ordinances also regulate sign placement—owners are told to line up their signs with others on the block, for example. Materials, likewise, are prescribed: wood is encouraged, plastic discouraged or forbidden altogether. Sign controls often specify lighting sources: indirect illumination (light shining onto the sign) is often required instead of neon tubing, bare lightbulbs, or "backlighting," used in most plastic signs. Some ordinances forbid lighting completely. (Neon, especially, is still held in disfavor in some areas.) Finally, ordinances sometimes require signs to be "compatible" in color and other design qualities with the facade of the building and the overall appearance of the street.

Existing signs frequently do not meet requirements set forth in sign controls. They are too big, for example, or project too far from the building. Typically, sign ordinances permit such "nonconforming" existing signs to remain, but only for a specified period, after which they must be removed. If they need repair before then, or if the business changes owners, they must likewise be removed.

Sign controls offer communities the chance to reduce visual blight. They can also assist in producing both a new visibility and a new viability for historic commercial districts. Yet sign ordinances are not without problems. Sign controls satisfy contemporary ideas of "good taste." But "bad taste" has ample historic precedent. And in any case, tastes change. What is tasteful today may be dated tomorrow. Sign controls can impose a uniformity that falsifies history. Most historic districts contain buildings constructed over a long period of time, by different owners for different purposes; the buildings reflect different architectural styles and personal tastes. By requiring a standard sign "image" in such matters as size, material, typeface and other qualities, sign controls can mute the diversity of historic districts. Such controls can also sacrifice signs of some age and distinction that have not yet come back into fashion.<sup>7</sup> Neon serves as an instructive example in this regard: once "in," then "out," then "in" again. Unfortunately, a great number of notable signs were lost because sign controls were drafted in many communities when neon was "out." Increasingly, however, communities are enacting ordinances that recognize older and historic signs and permit them to be kept. The National Park Service encourages this trend.

### Sign as Icon

Signs often become so important to a community that they are valued long after their role as commercial markers has ceased. They become landmarks, loved because they have been visible at certain street corners—or from many vantage points across the city—for a long time. Such signs are valued for their familiarity, their beauty, their humor, their size, or even their grotesqueness. In these cases, signs transcend their conventional role as vehicles of information, as identifiers of something else. When signs reach this stage, they accumulate rich layers of meaning. They no longer merely advertise, but are valued in and of themselves. They become icons.

## Preserving Historic Signs

Historic signs can contribute to the character of buildings and districts. They can also be valued in themselves, quite apart from the buildings to which they may be attached. However, any program to preserve historic signs must recognize the challenges they present. These challenges are not for the most part technical. Sign preservation is more likely to involve aesthetic concerns and to generate community debate. Added to these concerns are several community goals that often appear to conflict: retaining diverse elements from the past, encouraging artistic expression in new signs, zoning for aesthetic concerns, and reconciling business requirements with preservation.

Preserving historic signs is not always easy. But the intrinsic merit of many signs, as well as their contribution to the overall character of a place, make the effort worthwhile. Observing the guidelines given below can help preserve both business and history.

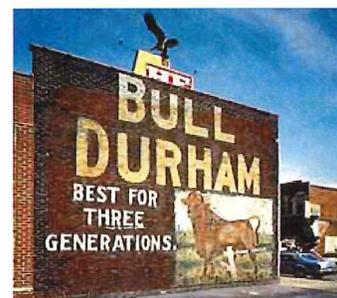
### Retaining Historic Signs

Retain historic signs whenever possible, particularly when they are:

- associated with historic figures, events or places.



This fading sign was painted in Baltimore in 1931 or 1932. It survives from the campaign to enact the 21st amendment to the United States Constitution, which repealed prohibition. Photo: NPS files.



Signs for Bull Durham Tobacco once covered walls all over the country. Photo: Jack E. Boucher, HABS, NPS.

- significant as evidence of the history of the product, business or service advertised.
- significant as reflecting the history of the building or the development of the historic district. A sign may be the only indicator of a building's historic use.
- characteristic of a specific historic period, such as gold leaf on glass, neon, or stainless steel lettering.
- integral to the building's design or physical fabric, as when a sign is part of a storefront made of Carrara glass or enamel panels, or when the name of the historic firm or the date are rendered in stone, metal or tile. In such cases, removal can harm the integrity of a historic property's design, or cause significant damage to its materials.
- outstanding examples of the signmaker's art, whether because of their excellent craftsmanship, use of materials, or design.
- local landmarks, that is, signs recognized as popular focal points in a community.
- elements important in defining the character of a district, such as marquees in a theater district.

### **Maintaining and Repairing Historic Signs**

Maintenance of historic signs is essential for their long-term preservation. Sign maintenance involves periodic inspections for evidence of damage and deterioration. Lightbulbs may need replacement. Screws and bolts may be weakened, or missing altogether. Dirt and other debris may be accumulating, introduced by birds or insects, and should be cleaned out. Water may be collecting in or on sign cabinets, threatening electrical connections. The source of water penetration should be identified and sealed. Most of these minor repairs are routine maintenance measures, and do not call for special expertise. All repairs, however, require caution. For example, electricity should be turned off when working around electric signs.

More extensive repairs should be undertaken by professionals. The sign industry is a large and active one. Sign designers, fabricators and skilled craftsmen are located throughout the country. Once in danger of being lost altogether, gold leaf on glass and porcelain enamel are undergoing revivals, and the art of bending neon tubes is now widely practiced. Finding help from qualified sources should not be difficult. Before contracting for work on historic signs, however, owners should check references, and view other projects completed by the same company.

Major repairs may require removal of the sign to a workshop. Since signs are sometimes damaged while the building is undergoing repair, work on the building should be scheduled while the sign is in the shop. (If the sign remains in place while work on the building is in progress, the sign should be protected.)

Repair techniques for specific sign materials are discussed below (see "Repairing Historic Sign Materials"). The overall goal in repairs such as supplying missing letters, replacing broken neon tubing, or splicing in new members for deteriorated sections is to restore a sign that is otherwise whole. Recognize, however, that the apparent age of historic signs is one of their major features; do not "over restore" signs so that all evidence of their age is lost, even though the appearance and form may be recaptured.

### **Reusing Historic Signs**

If a building or business has changed hands, historic signs associated with former enterprises in the building should be reused if possible by:

- keeping the historic sign—unaltered. This is often possible even when the new business is of a different nature from the old. Preferably, the old sign can be left in its historic location; sometimes, however, it may be necessary to move the sign elsewhere on the building to accommodate a new one. Conversely, it may be necessary to relocate new signs to avoid hiding or overwhelming historic ones, or to redesign proposed new signs so that the old ones may remain. (The legitimate advertising needs of current tenants, however, must be recognized.) Keeping the old sign is often a good marketing strategy. It can exploit the recognition value of the old name and play upon the public's fondness for the old sign. The advertising value of an old sign can be immense. This is especially true when the sign is a community landmark.
- relocating the sign to the interior, such as in the lobby or above the bar in a restaurant. This option is less preferable than keeping the sign outside the building, but it does preserve the sign, and leaves open the possibility of putting it back in its historic location.
- modifying the sign for use with the new business. This may not be possible without destroying essential features, but in some cases it can be done by changing details only. In other respects, the sign may be perfectly serviceable as is.

If none of these options is possible, the sign could be donated to a local museum, preservation organization or other group.

### **Repairing Historic Sign Materials**

Porcelain Enamel

Porcelain enamel is among the most durable of materials used in signs.<sup>8</sup> Made of glass bonded onto metal (usually steel) at high temperatures, it keeps both its high gloss and its colors for decades. Since the surface of the sign is essentially glass, porcelain enamel is virtually maintenance free; dirt can be washed off with soap and water and other glass cleaners.

Porcelain enamel signs can be damaged by direct blows from stones and other sharp objects. If both the enamel surface and the undercoat are scratched, the metal surface can rust at the impact site. Because the bond between glass and metal is so strong, however, the rust does not "travel" behind the glass, and the rust is normally confined to localized areas. The sign edges can also rust if they were never enamelled. To treat the problem, clean the rust off carefully, and touchup the area with cold enamel (a type of epoxy used mostly in jewelry), or with enamel paints.

Dents in porcelain enamel signs should be left alone. Attempting to hammer them out risks further damage.

### Goldleaf or Gilding

Goldleaf or gilding is both elegant and durable. These properties made it among the most popular sign materials in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Surface-gilded signs (for example, gilded raised letters or symbols found on the exterior) typically last about 40 years. Damage to these signs occurs from weather and abrasion. Damage to gilded signs on glass normally occurs when the protective coating applied over the gilding is removed by harsh cleaning chemicals or scratched by scrub brushes. The sign can then flake upon subsequent cleanings.

Historic gilded signs can be repaired, typically by regilding damaged areas. An oil size is painted on the surface. The gold leaf is applied when the surface has become sufficiently "tacky." Similarly, historic "reverse on glass" goldleaf signs can be repaired—by experts. A sample of the flaking sign is first taken to determine its composition. Reverse on glass signs use goldleaf ranging from 12 to 23 karats. The gold is alloyed with copper and silver in varying amounts for differences in color. (Surface gilding—on raised letters, picture frames and statehouse domes—uses 23 karat gold. Pure gold, 24 karat, is too soft to use in such applications.) The damaged portions of the sign are then regilded in the same manner as they were done historically: the inside surface of the glass is coated with a gelatin; gold leaves about three inches square are then spread over the area. The new letter or design is then drawn in reverse on the new leaf, and coated with a backing paint (normally a chrome yellow). With the new design thus sealed, the rest of the leaf is removed. The sign is then sealed with a clear, water-resistant varnish.

Gilded signs, both surface and reverse on glass, can be cleaned gently with soap and water, using a soft cloth. Additionally, for glass signs, the varnish backing should be replaced every seven years at the latest.

### Neon

Neon signs can last 50 years, although 20-25 years is more typical. When a neon sign fails, it is not because the gas has "failed," but because the system surrounding it has broken down. The glass tubes have been broken, for example, thus letting the gas escape, or the electrodes or transformers have failed. If the tube is broken, a new one must be made by a highly skilled "glass bender." After the hot glass tube has been shaped, it must undergo "purification" before being refilled with gas.



Workers prepare the "metal cans" from a sign for re-mounting. Photo: Larry Kanter.

The glass and the metal electrode at the end of the tube are heated in turns. As these elements become hot, surface impurities burn off into the tube. The resulting vapor is then removed through "evacuation"—the process of creating a vacuum. Only then is the "neon" gas (neon or mercury-argon) added. Neon gives red light, mercury-argon produces blue. Other colors are produced by using colored glass and any of dozens of phosphor coatings inside the tube. Green, for example, can be produced by using mercury-argon in yellow glass. Since color is so important in neon signs, it is vital to determine the original color or colors. A neon studio can accomplish this using a number of specialized techniques.

A failing transformer can cause the neon sign to flicker intensely, and may have to be replaced. Flickering neon can also indicate a problem with the gas pressure inside the tube. The gas may be at too high or too low a pressure. If so, the gas must be repumped.

Repairs to neon signs also include repairs to the surrounding components of the sign. The "metal cans" that often serve as backdrops to the tubing may need cleaning or, in case of rust, scraping and repainting.

As with gilded signs, repair of neon signs is not a matter for amateurs.



These tubes in this amusement park's sign were broken and the surrounding "metal cans" needed work also. See below. Photo: Stan Fowler.

## New Signs and Historic Buildings

Preserving old signs is one thing. Making new ones is another. Closely related to the preservation of historic signs on historic buildings is the subject of new signs for historic buildings. Determining what new signs are appropriate for historic buildings, however, involves a major paradox: Historic sign practices were not always "sympathetic" to buildings. They were often unsympathetic to the building, or frankly contemptuous of it. Repeating some historic practices, therefore, would definitely not be recommended.

Yet many efforts to control signage lead to bland sameness. For this reason the National Park Service discourages the adoption of local guidelines that are too restrictive, and that effectively dictate uniform signs within commercial districts. Instead, it encourages communities to promote diversity in signs—their sizes, types, colors, lighting, lettering and other qualities. It also encourages business owners to choose signs that reflect their own tastes, values, and personalities. At the same time, tenant sign practices can be stricter than sign ordinances. The National Park Service therefore encourages businesses to fit their sign programs to the building.

The following points should be considered when designing and constructing new signs for historic buildings:

- signs should be viewed as part of an overall graphics system for the building. They do not have to do all the "work" by themselves. The building's form, name and outstanding features, both decorative and functional, also support the advertising function of a sign. Signs should work with the building, rather than against it.
- new signs should respect the size, scale and design of the historic building. Often features or details of the building will suggest a motif for new signs.
- sign placement is important: new signs should not obscure significant features of the historic building. (Signs above a storefront should fit within the historic signboard, for example.)
- new signs should also respect neighboring buildings. They should not shadow or overpower adjacent structures.
- sign materials should be compatible with those of the historic building. Materials characteristic of the building's period and style, used in contemporary designs, can form effective new signs.
- new signs should be attached to the building carefully, both to prevent damage to historic fabric, and to ensure the safety of pedestrians. Fittings should penetrate mortar joints rather than brick, for example, and signloads should be properly calculated and distributed.

## Summary and References

Historic signs once allowed buyers and sellers to communicate quickly, using images that were the medium of daily life. Surviving historic signs have not lost their ability to speak. But their message has changed. By communicating names, addresses, prices, products, images and other fragments of daily life, they also bring the past to life.

*With halting steps I paced the streets, and passed the sign of "The Crossed Harpoons" —but it looked too expensive and jolly there. . . . Moving on, I at last came to a dim sort of light not far from the docks, and heard a forlorn creaking in the air; and looking up, saw a swinging sign over the door with a white painting upon it, faintly representing a tall straight jet of misty spray, and these words underneath — "The Spouter Inn: —Peter Coffin."*

The creaking wooden sign in *Moby Dick* identifies public lodging. But it also does a great deal more than that. It projects an image. It sets a mood and defines a place. The ability to convey commercial and symbolic messages is a property of all signs, not just those in novels.

Every sign hanging outside a door, standing on a roof, extending over a storefront, or marching across a wall transmits messages from the sign maker to the sign reader. Mixed in with names, addresses, business hours and products are images, personalities, values and beliefs.

### NOTES

1. Bill Evans and Andrew Lawson, *Shopfronts*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1981, p. 109, 114.



Neon fabricators are installing the new tubing in the repaired and remounted cans. Photo: Larry Kanter.



This hanging pig is delightful, even without its neon. Holes show where tubing was attached. It has been a local landmark in Baltimore's Fells Point neighborhood for over 60 years. Photo: NPS files.

2. Charles L.H. Wagner, *The Story of Signs: An Outline History of the Sign Arts from Earliest Recorded Times to the Present "Atomic Age"*. Boston: Arthur MacGibbon, 1954, p. 37.
3. Rudi Stern, *Let There Be Neon*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 1979, p. 19.
4. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*. Rev. ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977.
5. George H. Kramer, "Preserving Historic Signs in the Commercial Landscape: The Impact of Regulation." (Unpublished Masters Thesis: University of Oregon, 1989), p. 15. This section on sign regulation is heavily indebted to this work. See especially Chapter 2, History of Sign Regulation and Chapter 3, Mechanics of Sign Regulation, pp. 7-60.
6. *Berman v. Parker* involved the condemnation of an older building for an urban renewal project. The decision "ironically would prove to be a major spur to a new wave of local preservation laws...." Christopher J. Duerksen, ed. *A Handbook on Historic Preservation Law*. Washington, D.C.: The Conservation Foundation and The National Center for Preservation Law, 1983, p. 7.
7. A balanced approach to sign controls is offered by Peter H. Phillips, "Sign Controls for Historic Signs," PAS Memo, November 1988. (Published by American Planning Association, Washington, D.C.).
8. See John Tymoski, "Porcelain Enamel: The Sign Industry's Most Durable Material," *Signs of the Times*, December 1990, pp. 6671. For goldleaf, see October 1984 and November 1990 special issues of *Signs of the Times*. An excellent short "course" in neon evaluation is offered in *Neon: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, by Paul R. Davis, Identity, Spring 1991, pp. 5659.

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