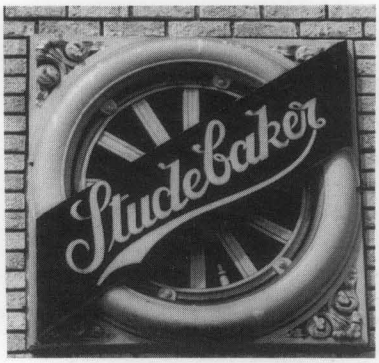
25 PRESERVATION BRIEFS



The Preservation of Historic Signs

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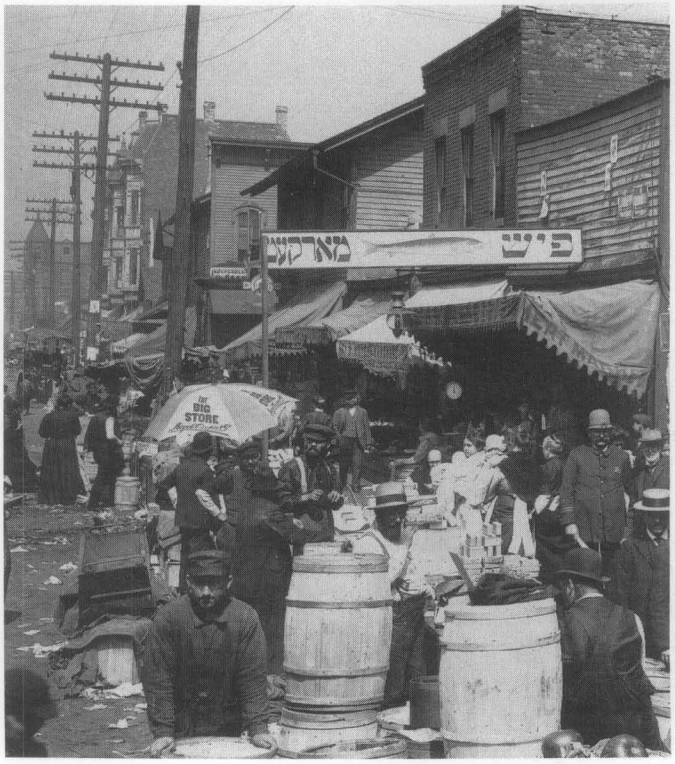
Preservation Assistance

"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 (Figs. 1 and 2). 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 their individuality: by a clever detail, a daring use of color and motion, or a reference to particular people, shops, or events.



1. Detail from a busy Chicago street market, about 1905. The sign over the sidewalk depicts a fish. It also gives the Hebrew letters for the English words "Fish Market." The sign offers information about the people who patronized the store that is not available from looking at the buildings. They were European Jews who were beginning to learn English. Chicago Historical Society, negative number ICHi–19155.

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.



2. N. Main Street, Rockford, Illinois, 1929. Signs give a wealth of information about a particular time and place. Photo: Lake County (IL) Museum, Curt Teich Postcard Archives.

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 (Fig. 3). (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.)





b

3. (a) Once commonplace, the three balls symbolizing the pawnbroker are now rare. These date from the 1920s (the supports are much more recent, as is the storefront to which they are attached). (b) Objects associated with a business continue to be used as signs. Photos: Thomas C. Jester.

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."[1]

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.

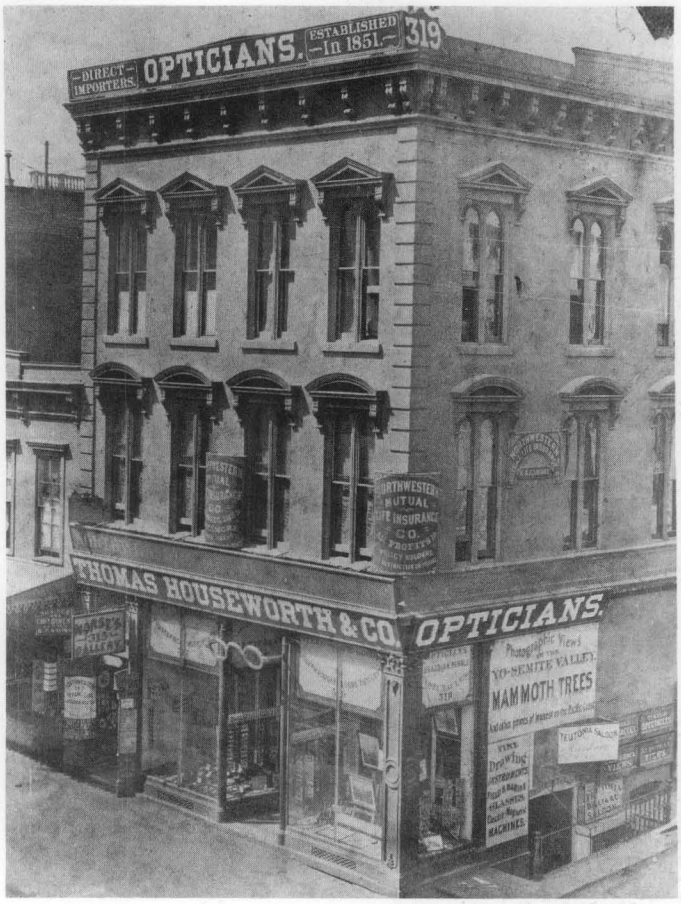
Nineteenth Century Signs and Sign Practices

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.

Signs in the form of *plaques, shields, and ovals* were used on many nineteenth-century buildings (Fig 4). Such signs had the advantage of being easily replaced as tenants came and went. They also easily incorporated images as well as lettering.



4. This circa 1866 view of a San Francisco building shows the range of signs used in the nineteenth century: Symbolic signs (the spectacles over the entrance); fascia signs; plaques, often in the shape of shields and normally used by insurance companies, in part to symbolize the protective function of insurance; posters, wall signs, window signs, hanging signs, and rooftop signs. Photo: Library of Congress.

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° 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 (Fig 5). 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.



5. Painted figures and lines of text cover this building in New York City, about 1890. The woman is distributing handbills. The painted workman on the ladder is putting up a poster. Altogether the signs are striking examples of the signmaker's art in the late nineteenth century. Photo: Courtesy of the New-York Historical Society, New York City.

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 nighttime sign lit by candles, and in 1840 the legendary showman P.T. Barnum built a huge sign illuminated by gas.[2] 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.

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 (Fig 6). 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.

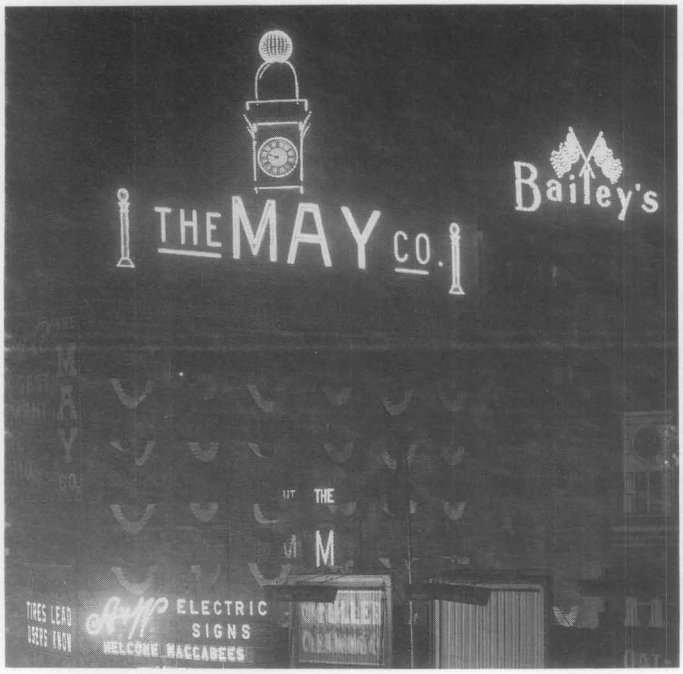
Moving signs were not unknown prior to the advent of electricity, for wind-driven signs had made their appearance in the nineteenth century. But electricity gave signs an unparalleled range of motion. This movement added yet another element to the life of the street.

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 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.[3] 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.[4] 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.

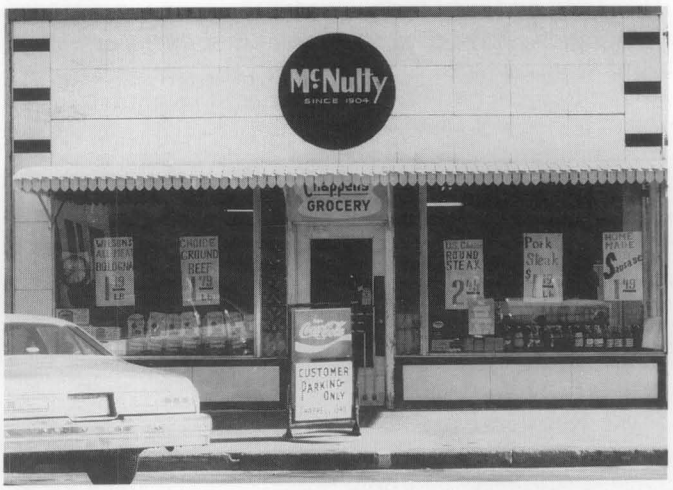


6. This view of Cleveland taken about 1910 shows how electricity transformed American cities. These dramatic and highly visible signs no doubt provided excellent advertising for "A & W Electric Signs." Its signs—at the bottom of the photograph—also proclaim the company to be the "exclusive agents" for a maker of "electric on enamel signs." Photo: Library of Congress.

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 (Fig. 7).

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 (Fig. 8).

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.



7. In the 1930s and 1940s, signs built into storefronts became popular. This example is from Guthrie, Oklahoma. Photo: H. Ward Jandl.



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

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.[5]

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."[6]

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.[7] 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 (Fig. 9). 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.



9. Signs are often popular neighborhood landmarks. This is one in Butte, Montana. Photo: Jet Lowe, HAER.

Preserving Historic Signs

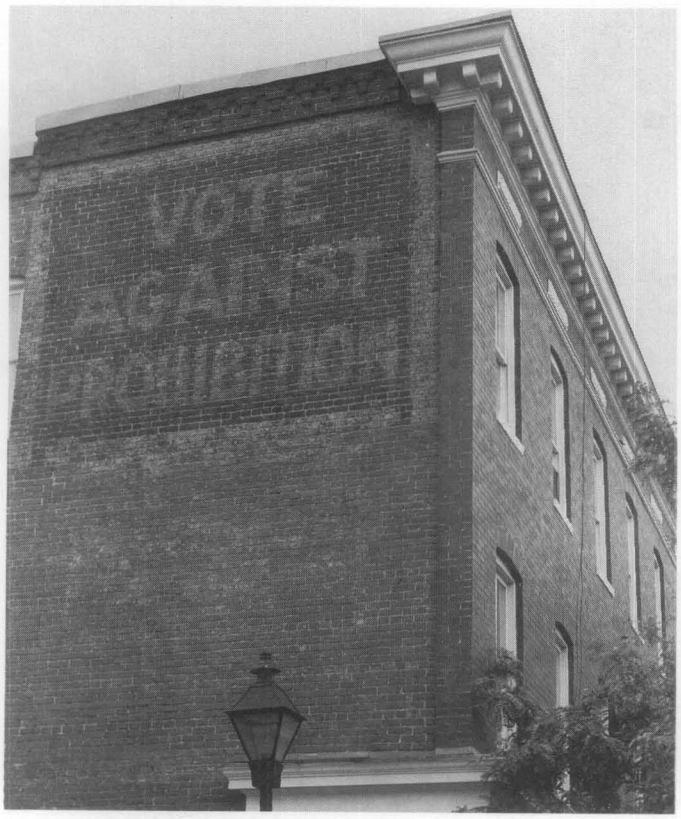
Historic signs can contribute to the character of buildings and districts. They can also be valued in themselves, quite apart from the buildings to which they may be attached. However, any program to preserve historic signs must recognize the challenges they present. These challenges are not for the 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.

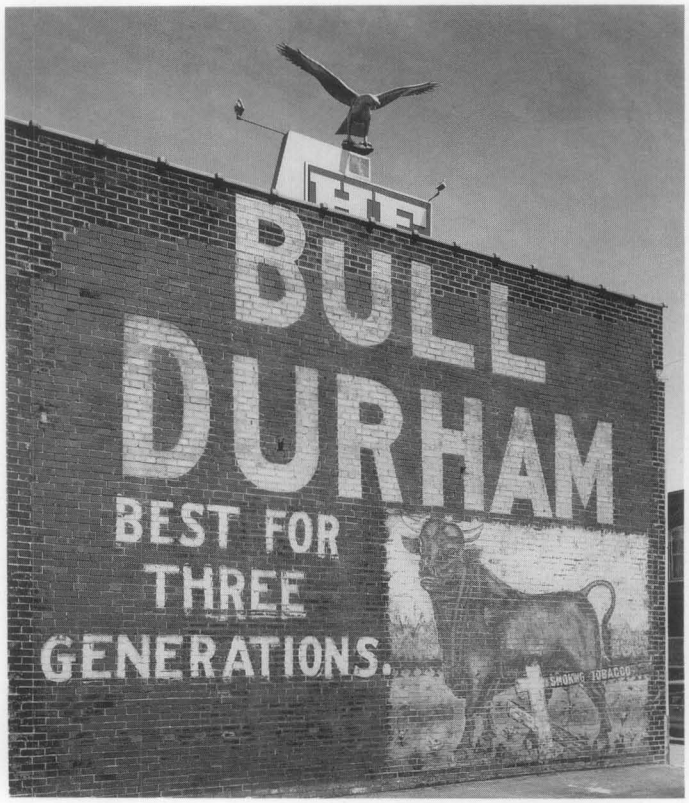
Retaining Historic Signs

Retain historic signs whenever possible, particularly when they are:

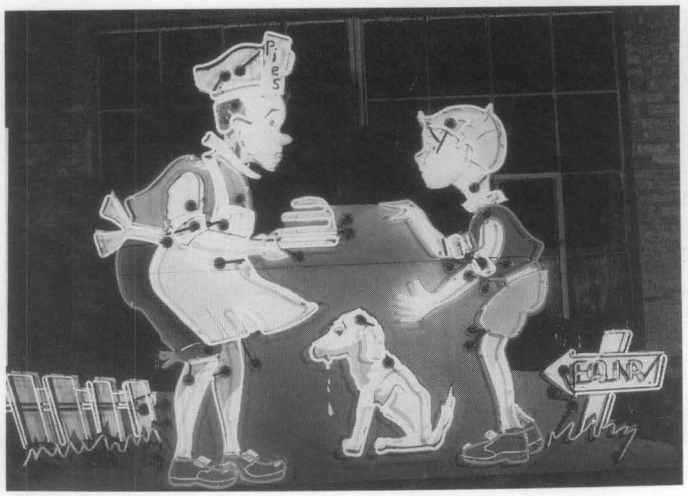
- associated with historic figures, events or places (Fig. 10).
- significant as evidence of the history of the product, business or service advertised (Fig. 11).
- significant as reflecting the history of the building or the development of the historic district. A sign may be the only indicator of a building's historic use (Fig. 12).
- 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



10. 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. Such fading brick wall signs are known as "ghost signs." Photo: Thomas C. Jester.



a



b

11. (a) Signs for Bull Durham Tobacco once covered walls all over the country. (b) Similarly, Simple Simon and the Pie Man appeared on Howard Johnson signs nationwide. This one has been moved to a shop for repair. Photos: (a) Jack Boucher, HABS; (b) Len Davidson.

or tile (Fig. 13). 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 (Fig. 14).
- local landmarks, that is, signs recognized as popular focal points in a community (Fig. 15).
- elements important in defining the character of a district, such as marquees in a theater district.

Maintaining and Repairing Historic Signs

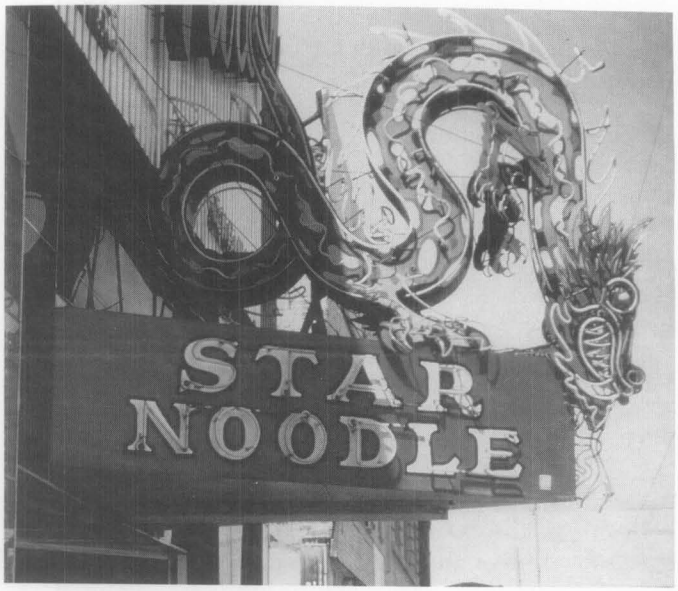
Maintenance of historic signs is essential for their long-term preservation. Sign maintenance involves periodic inspections for evidence of damage and deterioration.



12. The sign on this historic building gives important information about its past. Photo: Thomas C. Jester.



13. Historic signs were often built into a property—and often under foot. Photo: Richard Wagner, National Trust for Historic Preservation.



14. This Ogden, Utah, sign is a superb example of neon. Photo: deTeel Patterson Tiller.



15. The sign for the Busy Bee Cafe is well-known throughout Dubuque, Iowa. Photo: National Park Service, Rocky Mountain Regional Office.

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" on page 10). 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.**

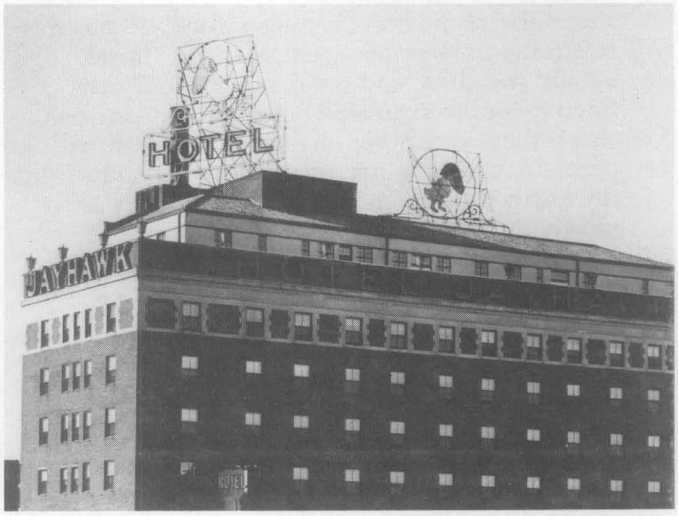
Reusing Historic Signs

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

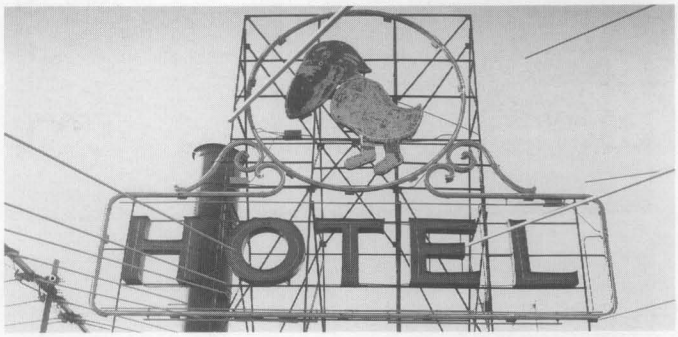
- keeping the historic sign—unaltered. This is often possible even when the new business is of a different nature from the old. Preferably, the old sign can be left in its historic location; sometimes, however, it may be necessary to move the sign elsewhere on the building to accommodate a new one. Conversely, 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 (Fig. 16). In other respects, the sign may be perfectly serviceable as is.

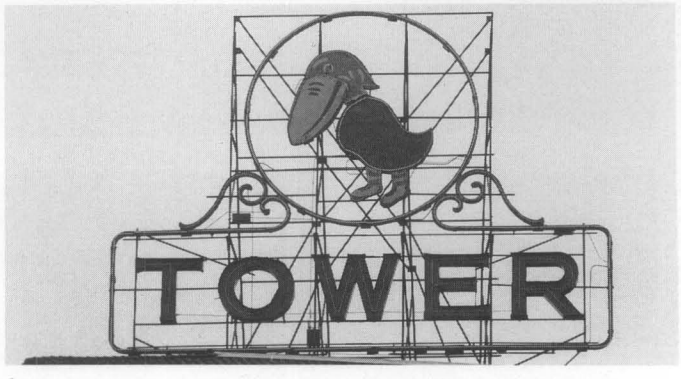
If none of these options is possible, the sign could be donated to a local museum, preservation organization or other group.



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16. (a) The Jayhawk Hotel in Topeka, Kansas, was built in 1926; (b) Its prominent and popular rooftop signs were deteriorating when the hotel closed; (c) The new owners converted the building to offices, but were able to keep the historic signs by changing "HOTEL" to "TOWER." The new, repaired, signs reuse three of the historic letters: T, O, and E. Photos: (a and b) Kiene and Bradley; Courtesy, Kansas State Historical Society; (c) Kansas State Historical Society.

Repairing Historic Sign Materials

Porcelain Enamel. Porcelain enamel is among the most durable of materials used in signs.[8] 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.

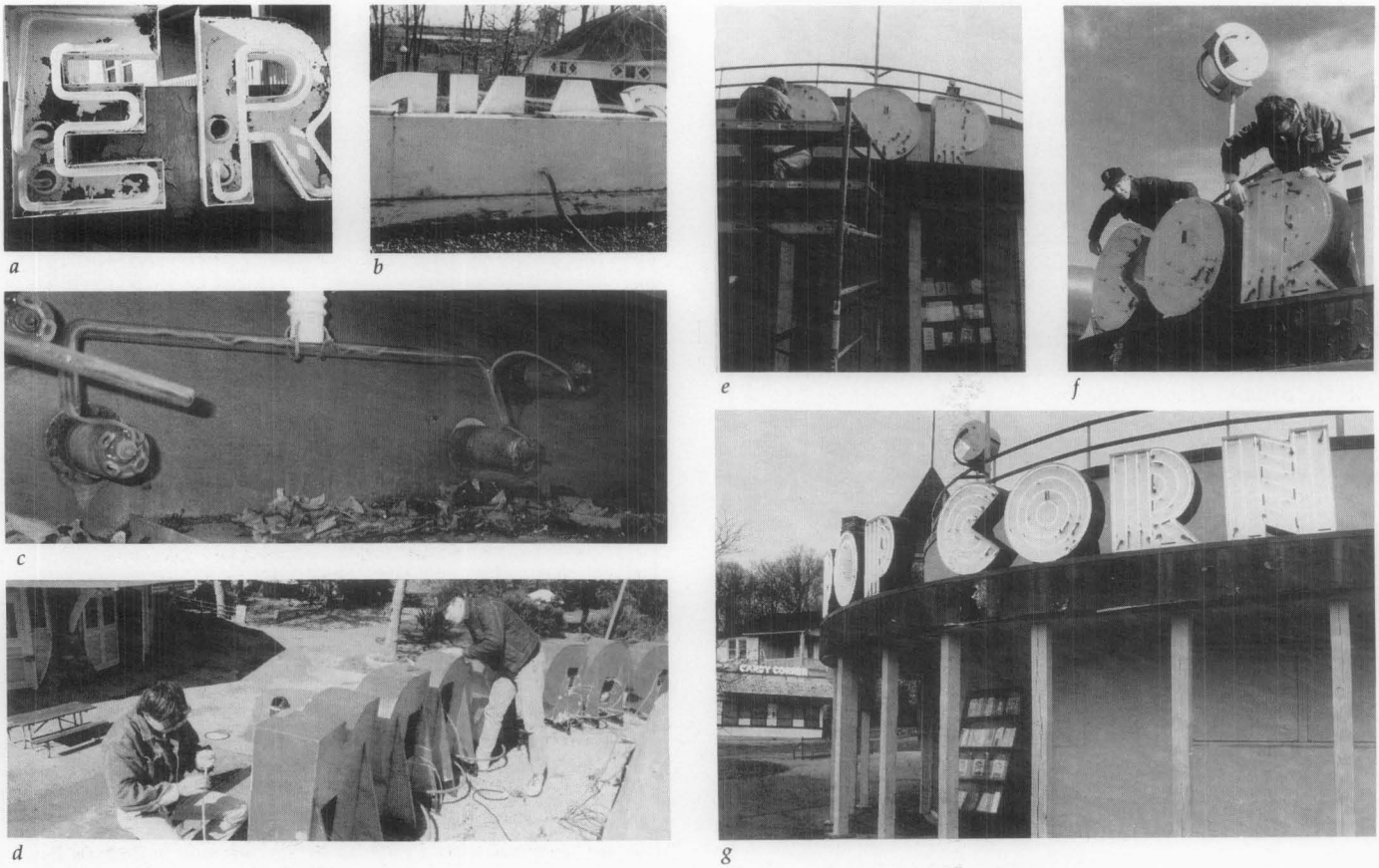
Porcelain enamel signs can be damaged by direct blows from stones and other sharp objects. If both the enamel surface and the undercoat are scratched, the metal surface can rust at the impact site. Because the bond between glass and metal is so strong, however, the rust does not "travel" behind the glass, 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 touch-up 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

(continued next page)



17. Glen Echo Park near Washington, D.C., is an early 20th century amusement park. (It is the home of the first bumper car ride in the world.) Its neon signs needed repair: (a) tubes were broken and the surrounding "metal cans" needed work also; (b) and (c) removal of the back of "Candy Corner" sign revealed debris from insects and birds; (d) preparing the "metal cans" from the "Pop Corn" sign for remounting; (e) and (f) neon fabricators installing the new tubing in the repaired and remounted cans; (g) repairs finished, the relit signs enliven the park once again. Photos: (a–c) Stan Fowler; (d–f) Larry Kanter; (g) Rebecca Hammel.

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. 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 neons signs is not a matter for amateurs (Fig. 17).

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.

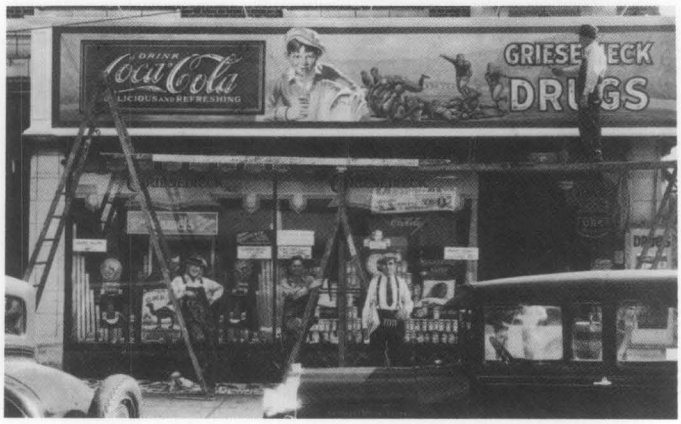
Yet many efforts to control signage lead to bland sameness. For this reason the National Park Service discourages the adoption of local guidelines that are too restrictive, and that effectively dictate uniform signs within commercial districts. Instead, it encourages communities to promote diversity 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.

Conclusion

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 (Fig. 18).



18. Sign painters pausing from their work, 1932. Photo: Courtesy, Cumquat Publishing Co. and Tettaton Sign Co., St. Louis, Missouri.

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.

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

NOTES

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

[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] See 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. 66–71. 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. 56–59.

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