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ICONS AND EYE-CONS: Signs in the Houston Landscape

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The visual structure of our urban landscapes tells something about society's priorities. These forms, and the relationships of parts within the whole of the city, present a diagram representing the essential structure a particular social order requires for its activities. So the neutral grid and special precinct of the *agora* comment on the relative interplay of private and public life in Ancient Greece; the walled city and central cathedral tell us about Medieval life and religion; the sequence and hierarchies indicate the absolute authority of an Emperor in the Imperial Peking.

In America, the street and its extensions, the grid, brought a kind of uniformity of division consistent with democracy. More recent evolution has resulted in the emergence of the radially concentric city plan, a kind of "wagon-wheel" derived from the existence of an historic central core (Downtown) and the superimposition of evenly-spaced radiating arterial roadways. The advent of freeways tended to interconnect these radiating arms at an appropriate distance where speed facilitated interchange within the total system, completing the connections between the "spokes".

This form, embodied nearly perfectly in the organization of Houston's pattern, reflects a pure expression for uniform distribution within the urban network. As this pattern is reinforced by other factors, such as decreasing density from the center, the necessity to diversify and repeat services becomes one feature. This redundancy, characterized by the four-gas-

stations-on-the-corner, results from the relatively low population density at the outer fringes of the city.

Another feature of this urban form is the requirement to communicate location, and where an enterprise has a single location this means both the deployment of signs to advertise, as well as to develop appropriate forms of signage at the location itself.

Certain special characteristic elements develop to embellish the urban landscape, consistent with the central themes of a particular society. In a social order where rapid growth and change are primary factors, creating an essential feature of near-constant newness, the forms of communication become the glue that binds the disconnected system together.



It should be no surprise, therefore, that the Houston landscape is populated by nearly every conceivable form of sign. With the sheer population increases over the past several decades, the nearly-geometric rate of expansion and increase of urban land size, and the diversity of this population, the necessity to communicate information for the dispersal of goods and services increases. A strong attitude to *laissez-faire* policy, no clear mandates for the "public good" within the power structure, and an evolving catalogue of information needs have contributed to a diversity of sign forms.

Additionally, it should be noted that there is an even more subtle correspondence between the evolution of signs and the nature of urban space itself. The traditional city, evolved before the Nineteenth Century, may be characterized by a *solid*, where built form occupied a density such that urban exterior space was largely defined by (and stood in contrast to) that occupied by buildings. To an extent, this density was due to limited means of circulation by the populace; that is, people were pedestrians. Our new cities are characterized by the extended grid and the domination of the automobile. This technological breakthrough has created a context where buildings no longer make space, but are objects *in* space. The spaces between buildings, in fact, are often occupied by automobiles since we are a drive-in culture.

The situation has been compounded by the fact that Modern Architecture itself has developed essentially as an abstract form of expression, with few culturally-understood messages being communicated through a taxonomy of building types which is cultural property. As a result, the sign form has emerged to help in stating

the message. Therefore, the classic conflict between architectural form and signs in some ways is related to this.

As the forms of buildings present ambiguous or arbitrary meanings, and as they become further isolated objects in the urban landscape, signs evolve to fill in the gap in communication. The signs not only may dominate an architectural form, but also command our primary perceptions of the passing scene. Consider to what extent one's impressions of the urban landscape are formed by signs; this is largely because the buildings themselves are, in relative proportion, small, low-rise, generally abstract in form, set far apart and placed back from the roadway. As a result, the signs have moved out from the buildings, and form a nearly continuous "wall" along the street frontage.

In fact, as one travels westbound along Westheimer from Main Street to Addicks, there is presented a near-history of contemporary building-street relationships. From buildings





defining the streetscape (Bagby to Montrose), to buildings set slightly back for parking in front (Montrose to Kirby), to buildings with some parking in front, most in back (Kirby to Loop 610), to buildings set in space (Galleria-Post Oak), to the advanced strip where signs define the road and the small buildings are set way back (Chimney Rock to Gessner), the relationships are nearly a history of the loosening-up of urban space in the last half century, with nearly half of the actual length of roadway having developed since 1965.

One of the principal criteria in this process is the reduction of ideas and reforming of them into *icons*, by which the salient features of a good or service can be perceived and retained in the mind. The process of design generally outlines parameters of an environmental problem, structures these into a hierarchy and derives a solution around constraints. It has been observed that in studies of the American urban landscape nearly only one constraint is stressed almost to the exclusion of others. This constraint is the profit

motive. Signs are literally its most visible manifestation.

The most primitive sign, often seen in vernacular cultures, is pure product display. That is, taking the actual goods and making them apparent. The second level is representation of the product at actual size (the styrofoam ice cream cone in the shop window). Additionally this presents the advantage of the potential for idealization of the image to one of perfection.

Literacy level within society is a key factor in the display and transmittal of ideas. With the emphasis on the display of actual goods, the essential mode has been that of a pre-literate society. Early signs continue the pictographic mode of representation with reduction to a two-dimensional image being an aid in proliferation. As society develops symbolic writing systems, signing passes from the totally implicit level to that of explicit typographic images; on the most basic level, this might be seen as calligraphy or hieroglyphics. Eventually this develops into conventionalized sounds, with composite connections of sounds into words. In any event, the net result is the more direct and conventionally understood expression of qualitative meanings from textual messages.

Related to this evolution are culturally limited symbols whose connotative meanings must be learned to be understood, such as the exclamation or question marks. Combinations of these connotative symbols having acquired meanings with pictographic or denotative symbols, and denotative symbols with connotative values (such as the golden crown meaning "fit for a king"), comprise basic elements of sign communication.

Legibility is a principal factor in communication and the graphic designer Marc Treib has observed that the advent of high-speed travel has created a context whereby perception was reverted to nearly purely visual means. That is, a greater ease of perception was compounded by the time for reaction; the images of signs tended to revert to pre-literate levels. First, the signs were painted on buildings. When buildings weren't available, one simply built a wall; hence, the billboard. Additionally, as Treib observes, ". . . there is a maximum limit to the speed at which visual perception can be converted to a physical reaction." Consequently, a need to simplify and clearly present the essential aspects of a message. In other words, an *eye-con*, or an icon.

The modest buildings which contain roadside businesses are simple shed structures, often in contrast to the elaborate signs which support them. While we might take exception to the design quality level of many of the signs themselves, it is interesting to note the reliance on symbolic images to quickly communicate the *eye-con*.

These symbols had to transmit, as cultural geographer J. B. Jackson observed, ". . . the absence of any hint of the workaday world which presumably is being left behind: any hint of the domestic, the institutional, the severely practical, the economical; any hint of the common or plain. On the contrary, what is essential, both inside and out, is an atmosphere of luxury, gaiety, of the unusual and unreal."

Further, the process of transformation has created a tension between our perceptions of architectural form and that of signs themselves. The old Western "false-front" has continued its tradition in the design of facades whose



character is not only indistinguishable from that of signs, but which is in fact often composed of sign elements. This has resulted in the phenomenon of "building-as-sign", a kind of billboard with a space attached behind it. Further transformations take this idea of the facade, or sign, and elaborate it with extensive architectural treatment. Functionally, however, it remains a sign and while it may serve as entrance to the building, generally speaking the actual working parts of the building are contained in a simple shed structure behind. The most interesting extension of this transformation has been the elaboration of the facade to the extent of creating a "sign-as-building". That is, there are cases in Houston of signs composed essentially of elements which can only be described as "architectural": arches, piers, roof forms. The buildings these signs service are generally abstract, neutral and meant to be a background.

Clearly, this indicates that sign forms communicate more directly than architectural forms. This is the result of the drive-in culture, no doubt, and we might reasonably bemoan the level of meaning that is being communicated. Certainly, the highest form of literacy is literature itself, where pictures are created in words. The next level would involve images of words: data, graphs, charts. Advertising combines images and words. Billboards deal in images and few words. Throughout, the evolution of designed typography, where letter forms themselves take on "character", assists in the process of reduction: "rope" letters suggest a Western theme, for example.

This denotative/connotative linking of elements of images and words constitutes the framework for a perception of signs. Typography, as part of the *eye-con* works to draw the written language closer to language as it is spoken,



to suggest gesture and inflection, or to create a mood. It also makes the word move back to that of a picture. This all operates at the scale of perception necessitated by our present urban context.

The role played by signs in filling out the communication of our urban landscape is only now being understood. The structure of this landscape and our "reading" of it is largely created through signage, to complete the picture diluted with the reduction of the solid city to a city populated by buildings set in space. New forms of architecture will have to evolve, if that sphere of environmental activity is to recapture any of the area being currently dominated by signs. This new vernacular will have to acknowledge the social priorities of the new American landscape and evolve to fit a more meaningful role within it.

As J. B. Jackson observed over two decades ago, in *Landscape* magazine, "Is it necessary to add that along with this development come a rash of billboards and a totally unrelated growth of highway-based industries? That chaos overtook countless communities and that much of the old landscape was damaged beyond repair? Those are the features we are not allowed to forget, the ones we lament. But they cannot entirely hide from us the fact that a new kind of architecture, popular in the truest sense, was for the first time given an opportunity to evolve. . . . It is true that we can no longer enter our towns and cities on avenues leading among meadows and lawns and trees, and that we often enter them instead through roadside slums. But we can if we choose transform these approaches into avenues of gaiety and brilliance, as beautiful as any in the world; and it is not yet too late."

A Landscape of Information

Within the urban environment, we are simultaneously confronted by a multitude of information at various scales. Can you find all the signs?





Showing Your Stuff

The lowest form of signing—simply displaying all your products (or listing them)—is a hold-over from a preliterate society.







Signs on Buildings - I

Vernacular identification, where the personal service of an individual is nearly synonymous with the product.





YOU ARE NOT
TOO BIG
WE CAN
FIT YOU

BUCKS

MENS WEAR

BIG...We can Fit You/Sizes to 66

SHOE REPAIRS

The Salsons

Signs on Buildings - II

At some point, someone discovered the obvious: you can paint a large sign on a building. With a simple shed form, the building recedes visually and graphics dominate. The next step is also obvious: eliminate the building and you have a billboard.



Signs on Buildings - III

The necessity for advertising often creates an equality between the relative size and/or impact of the building form and the sign placed on it.





MEX Special
FOOD TO GO CHICKEN

203

MEXICAN FOOD
TACO DINNER
TACOS ENCHILADA DINNER
CARNITAS

Hamburger









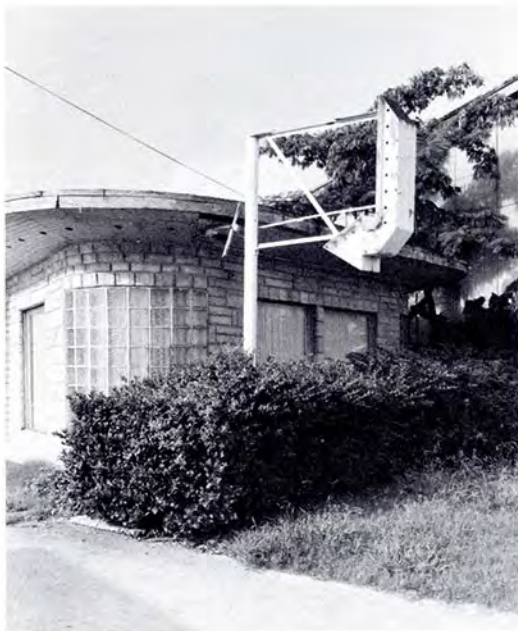
Signs - Symbols

Signs, in a most developed form, combine graphics or words with typography, or letter styling, to suggest a mood or image, along with symbols, both denotative or connotative.





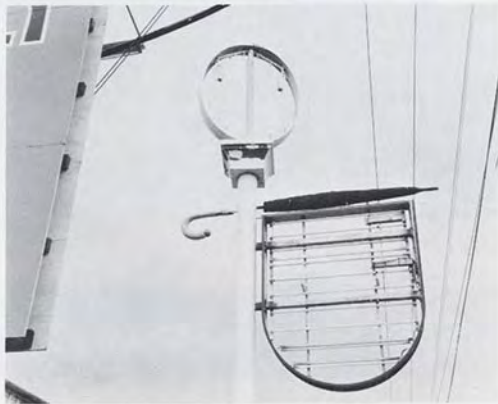






Symbols

Symbols can denote a product, or connote a mood or image, or do both, as in Gaido's Cowboy Shrimp.



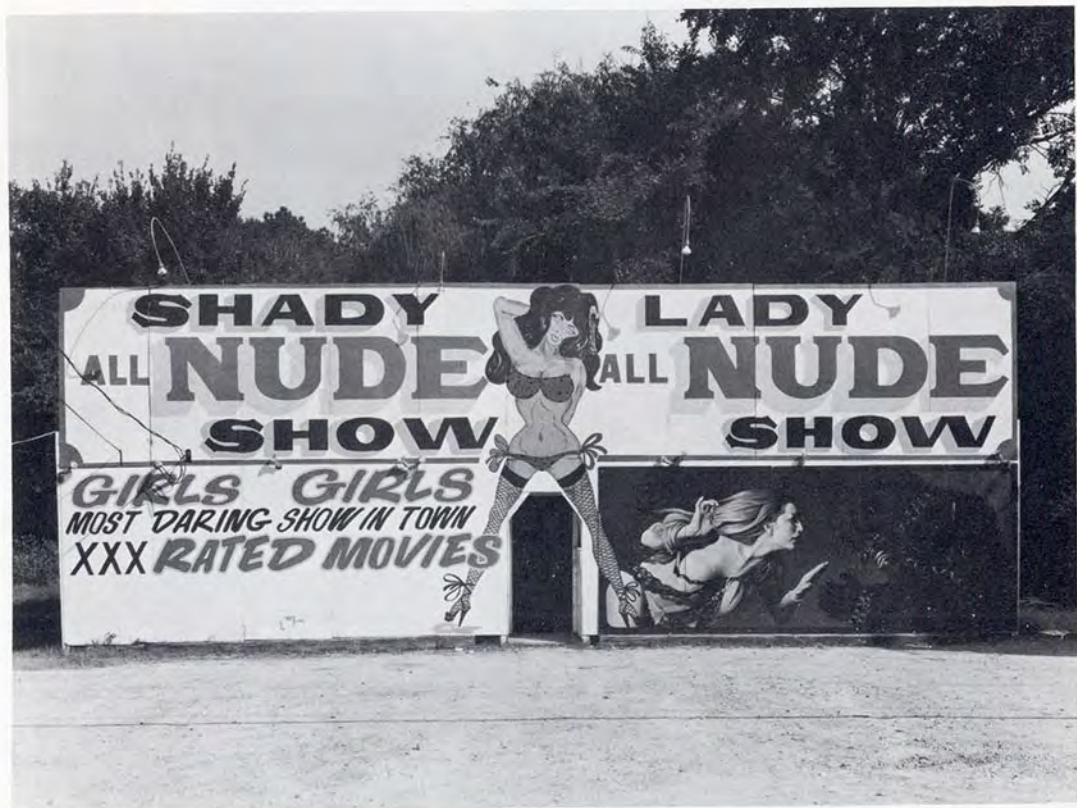




Signs as Buildings/Buildings as Signs

When building form is inadequate to communicate, a transformation process occurs creating a hybrid range of Buildings as Signs, or even Signs which take on elements to become Buildings.



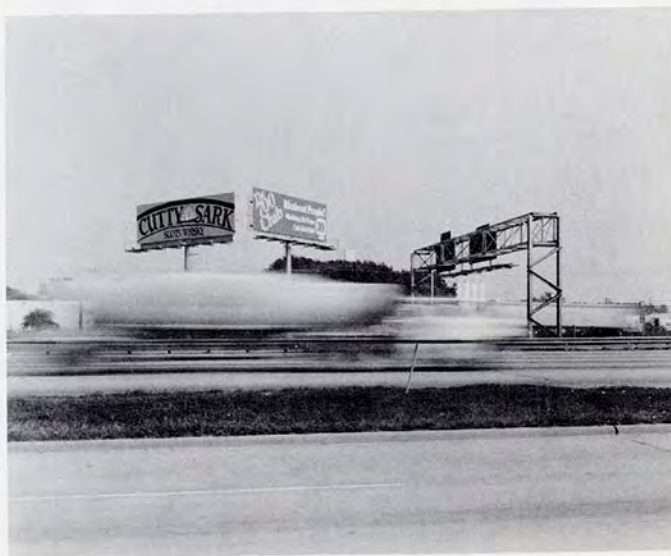






Signs in Space

The vastness and emptiness of our urban spaces often receives its only marking by virtue of the large-scale signs which reach out into it to grab over long distance and high speed.



Signs Versus Buildings

Large-scale graphics to communicate over distance, a hierarchy of levels of information to deliver the complete message in logical sequences, result in sign forms in contrast to the low-rise buildings which they support. In some cases, the signs are larger than these buildings and also rendered in a quasi-architectural motif.







FURTHER READINGS

Signs, symbols, graphics, typography—these are all interwoven in a culture where verbal and visual communication dominate the processes of society. Often, it is hard to tell which of the built forms in our urban landscapes define our perceptions of the city: buildings or signage. As discussed in the accompanying essay, they often merge together.

It is unlikely, in a society organized around communication, that signs will be eliminated. Even the issues of control require a sensitive approach to real needs beyond the simplistic "beautification" approach. Theories of urban form, the psychology of perception, the politics of information, the free market system, an architecture of communication . . . the issues are complex.

The following basic books should be an aid to an informed appraisal of the issues.

Ashley/Myer/Smith. **CITY SIGNS AND LIGHTS.** Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1973.

(An intelligent analysis of information and communication needs at the level of public policy, dealing with esthetics and controls while recognizing both the rights of free enterprise and public safety. Contains a good bibliography on the psychology of perception, general references on environmental communication, and specifics on public signs, signals, markings and lighting.)

Ballinger, Louise Bowen and Raymond A. Ballinger. **SIGN, SYMBOL, AND FORM.** New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1972. 745.6 B192.

(This is your basic coffee-table book on the subject, with photographs as its primary virtue. Its major flaw is that the examples are too "tasteful" and represent a myopic vision of the issues.)

Blake, Peter. **GOD'S OWN JUNKYARD.** New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964. 711 B

(This is the classic "snipe at blight" book, whose provocative success was undoubtedly due to its appearance at the crest of the 1960's "beautification" movement. Notwithstanding its elitist stance, some of its issues on visual blight are still with us, although the remedies are more complex than those suggested.)

Constantine, Mildred and Egbert Jacobson. **SIGN LANGUAGE.** New York: Reinhold, 1961.

(Somewhat dated by now, this is also regarded nevertheless as a basic reference on communication on buildings and in the landscape.)

Ewald, William R. **STREET GRAPHICS.** McLean, VA.: American Society of Landscape Architects, 1971.

(A technical reference dealing with "design controls". Also includes a legal review of selected ordinances. Two bibliographies cover both topics.)

Sutton, James. **SIGNS IN ACTION.** New York: Reinhold, 1965.

(The best virtue of this small book is its positive attitude toward the potential for signs in the environment.)

Venturi, Robert, et al. **LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS.** Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1976. 720.9793 V469.

(A now-classic rebuttal to Peter Blake's book cited above, as well as an intelligent interpretation of the evolution of commercial architecture and its relevance to studies of urban form and contemporary architectural design.)

Zube, Ervin H., ed. **LANDSCAPES.** Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1970.

(A selection of essays by the cultural geographer J. B. Jackson, whose interpretations of the Southwest are extremely relevant reading. A few relate directly to signs in our environment.)

Icons and Eye-Cons: Signs in the Houston Landscape is one in a series of publications prepared for Houston Public Library's project "CITY!" — Our Urban Past, Present, and Future which is funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Other booklets list library materials which explore the social, cultural and political forces which have shaped American cities.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Paul Hester is a professional photographer, currently working at the Rice University Media Center. A graduate of Rice and Rhode Island School of Design, he has taught at both institutions, as well as Houston's High School for Performing and Visual Arts. In addition to numerous exhibitions of his work, he has received several grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and was a Thomas J. Watson Fellow. One of two photographers for *Houston: An Architectural Guide*, he has also had work published in several magazines and journals.

Peter Papademetriou is a teacher, a writer and a practicing architect in Houston, Texas. A graduate of Princeton and Yale, he is currently an Associate Professor at the Rice University School of Architecture. While at Yale, he was co-editor of *Perspecta 12*. Subsequently, he designed and edited titles for the series *Architecture at Rice*, authored and designed several individual books including *Houston: An Architectural Guide*, and has contributed numerous articles and reviews in the international professional press. Currently he is Southwest Correspondent to *Progressive Architecture*. His professional work is done as an Associate Partner with Taft Architects.

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