

Planning for Signs

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By and large, on issues where their respective interests intersect, planners and sign manufacturers share the same goals for the communities in which they work: an attractive built environment, a vibrant natural environment, successful commercial districts, and a healthy local economy. But because this relationship is between the regulator and the regulated, it is natural that differences of opinion exist on how to achieve these common goals.

PLANNERS AND SIGNS

Signs are part of a myriad of elements of the built environment that a planner typically deals with on a daily basis. Long-range comprehensive or master planning, as well as issues of residential development, economic development, affordable housing, environmental protection and management, urban design, transportation and infrastructure, zoning and land development control, and information systems are the bread and butter of most planning agencies. For a planner, signage issues would be addressed in two ways: as part of long-range urban design planning or as part of current planning (e.g., permit review). For some communities, the two functions are very distinct; policies and codes are developed by one set of planners and are implemented by a different section or division within the planning department.

For planners whose chief responsibilities are to work on urban design or long-range comprehensive planning, signage issues are addressed when community design policies and guidelines—whether they be for special districts or the community as a whole—are developed. But for the most part, planners who deal with signage issues everyday work at the sign permit counter and/or serve as staff to design review, architectural review, or historic district commissions. The signage policies that current planners are implementing were likely determined in the long-range planning process or in the drafting or amending of the zoning or sign code.

Signage policies should represent the broadest possible consensus or prevailing community viewpoint about the physical appearance of the city. And this is exactly the reason that they will inevitably be construed as too restrictive by some and completely reasonable by others.

Ideally the planning and design policies that affect signage should result from a planning process that:

- assesses the overall visual character of the community and then sets goals;
- involves citizens to determine their concerns and preferences in balancing economic, social, and cultural values;
- engages those most directly affected—businesses and sign manufacturers—in deciding what is acceptable;
- promotes the positive contribution signs can make to creating a sense of place in a district and in a community; and
- aims to ensure that whatever regulation results will allow commercial districts to function efficiently and effectively.

Actions at the sign permit counter on a given day are far removed from the original participatory planning process because the long-range urban design planning and sign code revision processes occur on a relatively infrequent basis. The focus at the counter is largely on what businesses and sign manufacturers are required to do or are prohibited from doing, rather than on why sign standards and design guidelines are being applied and what the community is trying to accomplish.

The intent of this report, therefore, is to encourage planners to think outside of the regulatory framework where signs are concerned and to approach signs as a positive design and communication element in their communities. With regard to sign manufacturers, this report seeks to expand their understanding of the planning process and contribute to their acceptance of the intent of sign controls and design standards that aim to improve the built environment and support local businesses.

SIGN MANUFACTURERS AND PLANNING

For those who design, make, sell, and use them, signs represent their livelihood. The sign manufacturers are motivated by the need to keep their businesses profitable, to help their client businesses and organizations inform the public about the location of that client, and to help those clients take advantage of a relatively low-cost form of business advertising. Sign manufacturers believe very strongly in the value an attractive product will bring to their clients and do their best to provide that.

Many people in the sign industry have fostered excellent relationships with the planners and sign-permitting staff in the communities in which they do business. (Chapter 7 will provide case studies from communities in which sign makers and planners successfully work together.) These sign professionals have educated themselves about the planning process and have come to understand and even support the rationale for sign regulation and urban design controls. They act as concerned citizens when they see visual pollution from too many signs and as watchdogs for zoning enforcement when they see signs that are in violation of the code or that have fallen into disrepair. They realize that to influence the outcome of plans and sign regulations, they must get involved in planning matters that affect their work. Sign trade publications regularly publish articles and editorials encouraging sign makers to involve themselves in planning and zoning matters in their communities.

Sign company representatives who have fostered good working relationships with planning staff are often invited to participate in sign code revision processes and in urban design planning. In return, planning departments will work with these firms to make revisions to the code when there are obvious inaccuracies in the language or when there are problematic provisions that are leading to an excessive number of variance requests—a sure sign that the code needs to be reexamined.

In general, the attitude of sign manufacturers toward sign regulation ranges from sympathetic understanding, to tolerance of a necessary evil, to willful disdain for sign code standards and permit requirements.¹ Determining the economic impact of sign codes on businesses has been one source of friction between the sign community and the regulators. Chapter 4 is devoted entirely to this issue.

There are other issues that arise in the industry literature and in discussions with planners that need to be resolved to advance the working relationship between sign makers and the planning profession. The first issue is the notion of signage as visual clutter. Sign manufacturers reject the opinion common among planners and many elected officials that on-premise signage is a primary source of visual clutter in the built environment. Other physical elements—such as utility lines and poles, billboards, traffic signs and devices, bus benches, and illegal and temporary signs—are the real culprits of clutter, they contend. Sign makers argue that this bias against on-premise signs leads many communities to enact restrictive sign codes that attack one potential source of clutter but leave many other sources of visual clutter unaddressed.

The unpredictability of design review and sign-permitting processes is another major concern for sign manufacturers. For many in the sign business, securing a sign permit is the only uncertain factor in the process of taking a sign from a design concept to installation. As is the case with developers and contractors, sign companies want certainty in the approval process. In sign regulation, certainty means clarity in the regulations, fairness and uniformity in how the rules are applied, and a reasonable turnaround time in administration. Sign companies would prefer that each sign not have to undergo a subjective determination of whether it meets the code. Too often, they argue, design review board members



Sign manufacturers often object to the notion that signage is the primary source of visual clutter. They contend other things, such as utility poles and lines, traffic signs, bus benches, and illegal signs, are the real culprits.

Sign-making materials and techniques has evolved rapidly in recent decades. Large firms that produce electrical signs use vinyl, plastic, plexiglass, aluminum, steel, or various combinations thereof.



Young Electric Sign Co.

and planning staff interject their personal opinions about the appearance of a sign, even if their complaint has no basis in written guidelines or in the ordinance.

A final concern is the problem created for sign companies by staff turnover at the sign permit counter. Sign company personnel whose task it is to get permits have said that they often find themselves in the role of “trainer” for new planners who are unfamiliar with their municipality’s zoning regulations, signage definitions, and structural terminology.² The varying levels of experience at the permit counter only add to fears about unpredictability and also can cause major delays.

Planners and sign makers have direct and ongoing involvement in each others’ work. As in any relationship between a regulator and the regulated, a lot of the contact between the two fields has been acrimonious. This report will encourage each side to recognize the other’s point of view and to learn to work together to achieve common goals.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE SIGN INDUSTRY

Signs have been used as wayfinding devices for thousands of years, since individuals in early civilizations began venturing beyond their immediate environment. Retailers of goods and services have used signs for identification, communication, and advertising purposes for many hundreds of years, since the time when ancient societies found themselves producing more than they could consume and began to trade their goods locally and overseas.³ Advertising by retailers is believed to have begun in the early eighteenth century, when retailers and inns used elaborate sign boards and posters to vie for attention (Nystrom 1978). Today, the role of signs in local economies and in the landscape continues to adapt to meet the needs of businesses and consumers, local culture, and technology.

The process of sign making has also evolved over hundreds if not thousands of years. Early signs were generally very small and constructed of

whatever materials were available, typically stone, and later wood or metal. Electric signs came into use at the beginning of the twentieth century. Neon technology was developed by French scientist Georges Claude in the 1920s and first used in signage by a Packard car dealership in 1923. Today, sign-manufacturing processes make use of a variety of technologies, and signs are made of synthetic materials, woods, metals, neon, and computerized and mechanical systems.

Generally speaking, sign company products can be placed in five categories: pole, roof, wall, projecting, and temporary. The latter category includes window signs, for sale/lease signs, pennants, flags, banners, credit card emblems, and public information and direction signs (e.g., “Restrooms,” “Exit,” and Americans with Disabilities signage).

Sign companies come in every size. They include several very large manufacturers grossing nearly \$200 million per year and employing thousands of people, to sizable corporations grossing more than \$5 million per year with hundreds of employees working in several branch offices, to midsize firms grossing several hundred thousand dollars per year and employing five to 20 or more people, to small shops that gross less than \$100,000 per year and employ only one or two people.

Large and medium-size sign companies are capable of manufacturing many different types of signs for both single-location and corporate franchise clients. These companies use a full complement of materials to produce many types of electrical signs, which may be made of luminous tubes, neon, flexible face material, vinyl, plastic, plexiglass, aluminum, steel, or various combinations thereof. Some companies also produce electronic message centers, such as time and temperature signs, and other variable text message systems that can be changed regularly. Many large and midsize companies also produce temporary signs, such as banners, and subcontract some of their work to custom sign makers. Small firms, on the other hand, have more narrow production capabilities, and consequently specialize in a limited number of types of signs. Other sign firms specialize in producing awning signs, both backlit electrical awnings or fabric awnings with vinyl lettering, which can be either electrical or non-electrical. Relatively new entrants to the field are franchised retail sign companies that produce banners, paper signs, and other temporary signs on a quick turnaround time.

A major subgroup of the industry, referred to as “letterheads,” produce small, one-of-a-kind signs using special materials and techniques, such as wood, glass, gold leaf, metal, hand painting, and air brushing. Some letterheads also produce vehicle graphics and painted window signs.

Until recently, U.S. sign companies generally operated either close to home or on a national scale; small and midsize firms worked and sold product primarily within the region in which they were located, while larger companies, with national corporate clients, delivered products throughout the country and had production facilities or divisions in several regions. Today, new computer technology has made it possible for smaller firms to cut production costs, improve design and engineering skills, diversify products, and thus compete at the national level.

SIGN TECHNOLOGY

The technology used in the sign-making process evolves rapidly, making capital investment an ongoing and costly necessity for sign companies. Computer-aided sign production (CAS) has been commonplace since the mid-1980s. Computers are routinely used for both graphic design and engineering components of sign design, and most vinyl cutters, routers, and plastic-molding equipment are now computerized. In



Elizabeth Longley

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Pike's Tent and Awning Unlimited

Awning signs, made of industrial fabrics or vinyl, are commonly used on older and historic buildings to blend with the architecture and provide customers and pedestrians with protection from the elements.

a large or midsize electric sign company, standard equipment includes paint spray booths, digitized routers for carving aluminum and steel, large-format scanners and digital printers, vinyl cutters, sheet metal and aluminum- molding equipment, plastic-molding equipment, steel cabinetry production equipment, and installation trucks with booms and baskets.

The biggest change in sign production in the latter twentieth century occurred in the 1950s with the introduction of plastic sign faces and the development of paints that adhere to plastic. The onset of wide-format digital printing in the 1980s permitted sign producers to expand plastic technology to the point where they can now print photographic-quality images directly onto vinyl, canvas, or photopaper. Ink-jet printers, electrostatic, and thermal transfer printers are the three primary equipment types used for wide-format images. Thermal-transfer printers are the most common printers used to produce outdoor signage. The top-of-the-line equipment accommodates vinyl sheets that are 15 feet high and up to 50 feet in length. The vinyl strips can be also “tiled” to create a very large image. This technology is commonly used to produce billboards but is also now used to create large-scale on-premise signage. Finally, technology to create electronic message signs—some with image clarity and color that approaches the appearance of television—has evolved rapidly in recent years. Such signs present a new challenge for regulators, given their brightness and the rapidity with which their messages and images can change. (See Appendix A for a list of issues related to electronic variable message signs.

THE SIGNAGE PROCESS START TO FINISH

There are 11 major steps in the sign-making process, starting with the initial contact between the sign salesperson and the client, and ending with sign installation and maintenance.

1. *Client meeting.* A salesperson from the sign shop meets with the client to determine the client's signage needs. Sales people will visit the client site to determine and discuss signage options given site and sign code restraints. This step may involve the sign designer as well (see Step 2).
2. *Site visit and analysis.* Ideally the sign designer will visit the site, which will help him or her determine the appropriate size, placement, and overall appearance of the signs to be produced. Such a visit is important to the designer's understanding of the building or site on which the signage will be installed and, as important, the context of the area in which the sign or signs will be placed. Note this step does not take place with many sign projects. Instead, the designer is expected to work from the photographs and descriptions provided by the sales staff. If such visits were standard procedure rather than reserved for special situations, it is possible that many issues regarding inadequate or out-of-character signage could be addressed before they become problems.
3. *Graphic design.* The graphic design staff prepare hand-drawn renderings or computer-generated drawings of a proposed sign. Some clients have a logo or thematic colors that must be displayed on the sign. Other clients give designers free reign to design their sign. A sign designer will be provided a certain amount of sign copy, symbols, trademarks, or logos that must be placed within a limited amount of sign surface area. Through client meetings or site visits, the salesperson and designer should determine whether the client wants a high-concept design (e.g., unique materials, colors, projecting objects) or a straightforward design. Sign companies with fully computerized design processes are capable of presenting the client with several design options, although that can add to the firm's up-front costs.
4. *Price estimating.* Working with the engineers and the graphic artists, on-staff estimators provide the salesperson with a price estimate of what it will cost to produce the sign. The price is based on labor and materials.
5. *Sales presentation.* The salesperson presents the proposed design and price to the client. If requested by the client, modifications are made to the proposed design and materials, and the price is recalculated.
6. *Credit approval.* The sign company works with the client to arrange financing for a sign that is being purchased outright or to draft a lease for a sign that is being leased.
7. *Permit processing.* The business owner or a sign firm representative—either an in-house expeditor or a outside permit agent working under contract—presents the drawings and design of the sign at the building and/or zoning permit counter. In some communities, when a sign being proposed is allowed as of right in the zoning district in which it will be built, a permit can be issued that day. When a sign being proposed requires a variance or must be approved by a design review board, the sign company will have to wait to schedule the sign for production until the permit application has been processed by a zoning board or design review board.
8. *Work order/job scheduling.* A work order is prepared to place the new job on the manufacturing schedule. This includes distributing blueprints to each department that is involved, coordinating with the purchasing department to order materials, and scheduling the job on the plant floor.
9. *Sign manufacture/production.* The sign is produced in the shop according to graphic design, engineering, and materials specifications.
10. *Sign installation.* The sign shop uses its equipment to install the sign, or it notifies one of its installation contractors that the sign is ready to be picked up and installed.
11. *Job completion.* The sign is completed and installed, and the client accepts the product and pays the sign company as agreed in the contract.

ENVIRONMENTAL GRAPHIC DESIGN

Environmental graphic design is a special discipline related to sign making. Signage and wayfinding systems found in major institutions (e.g., hospitals, zoos, campuses, downtowns, and tourist destinations) are often created by environmental graphic designers. The Society for Environmental Graphic Design defines the field as "the planning, design, and specifying of graphic elements in the built and natural environment." There are seven chief purposes served by environmental graphic design:

- **Identification:** confirms destination, creates landmarks, helps establish recognition (e.g., street numbering, entrance signs, public art)
- **Information:** communicates knowledge of designations, facts, and circumstances (e.g., kiosks, symbols, and directories)
- **Direction:** guides users to destinations in airports, hospitals, etc., and are commonly referred to as wayfinding systems
- **Interpretation:** provides verbal and visual explanations of a particular topic or set of artifacts (exhibits)
- **Orientation:** gives users a frame of reference within a particular environment (e.g., maps)
- **Regulation:** displays rules of conduct (e.g., "stop" or "no parking" signs)
- **Ornamentation:** enhances or beautifies the environment (e.g., banners, architectural coloration, gateways)

For new developments, environmental graphic designers work directly with architects and site planners to incorporate environmental signage into architectural and landscaping design themes. After the design is completed, the actual signage that comprises the environmental graphics system can be produced by a sign manufacturer that has the necessary equipment or materials, or that specializes in this type of special signage.

Source: Society for Environmental Graphic Design

ART AND GRAPHIC DESIGN

Sign design is fundamentally a commercial craft with an artistic element. The earliest professional sign makers were artistic painters and woodworkers. Today, new sign faces are designed by graphic designers, with the structure and electronic components being devised by engineers and technicians.

Sign designers do their work very much like all other graphic designers. Graphic artists at sign companies (or independent designers) work with the client to create a sign that conveys a desired image or message to the intended viewer, drawing on their respective senses and prior experience to create a mix of colors, letters, and materials that are visually compatible and likely to be noticed. Typically a client will have certain items of information that he or she wants to have included on the sign. Often sign makers are asked to develop a new logo or reproduce an existing logo or company typeface for a sign.

Sign companies that produce large numbers of identical signs for national or regional franchises and chains rely less heavily on in-house designers than those that customize signs to fit a site or building's specific setting and characteristics. These "quantity" companies are producing signs for which the color, typefaces, layout, and internal engineering mechanisms have been previously determined and standardized. There are also instances where a client will present the sign company with a drawing or description of a sign that he or she desires and simply ask that it be reproduced on a sign. A description of the sign-making process can be found in the box on the previous page.

NOTES

1. Information on sign industry perceptions of the sign approval process comes from interviews with sign professionals conducted by the author during site visits to sign companies in Toronto, Ontario; Winnipeg, Manitoba; South Bend, Indiana; Salt Lake City, Utah; and Las Vegas, Nevada.
2. See note 1.
3. Information on the history of signs comes from a conversation on March 13, 1998, with Kirk Brimley of Young Electric Sign Co. in Salt Lake City.

REFERENCE

Nystrom, Paul H. 1978. *Economics of Retailing*. New York: Arno Press.