

Signage has the potential to serve a critical role in human settlements for facilitating free speech, creating a sense of place, engaging public participation in decision-making, and promoting wayfinding and economic development. Virtually every US city has sign regulations of some type, yet many are seemingly the result of simplistic replications of the codes of other nearby jurisdictions based on little more than inclinations and convention, and uninformed by a growing body of signage science. This issue brings together timely signage research on key topics of interest to a wide range of stakeholders concerned about the relationships of signage with free speech, sense of place, public participation and economic development.

In the first article, Fontaine and Bradbury contend that while well-designed and located signage has been shown to be an important factor in determining retail business success, small independent retailers too infrequently make use of graphic design to effectively communicate a visual message about their business. It is argued that many of the small, locally-owned businesses essential for the revitalization the neighborhood business districts and downtown retail, lack awareness of the importance of high-quality graphic design for their branding and commercial success. Further, local governments frequently fail to provide guidance to these local businesses on their signage, nor do they emphasize or incentivize careful consideration of signage design and location.

In the second article, Jourdan, Strauss and Hunter explore an area of critical concern to urban planners, but as well to the many others concerned about citizen participation in the development and amendment of sign codes. The article assesses citizen participation as part of the development or amendment of sign codes as part of a review of communities that have revised their sign codes over the past 10 years. Then, based on that review, the authors identify best practices for improving sign code development and amendment processes. The best practices include several things that planners can do

on their own. These include building capacity among planners so they can lead sign code revision processes, encouraging communities to recognize indicators that sign code revision are needed, recruiting a diverse array of stakeholders to participate in the development and amendment processes, creating multiple opportunities for public participation, and developing materials to visually represent to stakeholders the impact of sign proposed regulations.

In the third article, Alan Weinstein provides especially useful and timely insight for those concerned about the Supreme Court's 2016 *Reed* decision that may have potentially invalidated portions of most local sign regulations in the US. As the author explains, the *Reed* ruling holds that any sign code provision that considers the message on a sign to determine how it will be regulated is content-based and is subjected to strict judicial scrutiny. As such it must be demonstrated that the regulation serves a compelling governmental interest and is the least restrictive alternative to achieve that interest. Since this decision is likely to significantly change how courts' treat sign codes, local governments are advised to carefully consider *Reed* when undertaking code reviews or developing new sign codes to avoid any of the content-based distinctions that created problems for the City of Gilbert. Further, *Reed* raises concerns about litigation risk that local governments likely want to avoid. All with an interest in the regulation, design and/or use of on-premise signage will find this article useful.

In the final article, Muhammad Rahman and Vikas Mehta (forthcoming) explore how words, type and letters convey meaning in an urban environment, and ultimately can significantly contribute to a neighborhood's sense of place. The authors contend letterforms help build social narratives and create inquisitive interpretive spaces through which viewers experience meaning. This is a result, in part, by how letterforms occupy space, convey characteristics, portray personality and physique, situate dimensionally and can be associated with emotions. Ultimately, it is concluded, urban typography can help create a neighborhood identity and plays an important role in urban revitalization by

communicating a neighborhood's societal aptitude and triggering an urban discourse. As such, they authors consider that design of urban typography can become communication tool to celebrate the unique assets of an urban neighborhood.

Taken together, the articles paint an interdisciplinary mosaic of timely issues confronting those designing, selling, regulating and using signage. Certainly the issues raised by Weinstein, about the *Reed* decision need to be high on the list of priorities for any community that regulates signage and has not yet taken steps to make their sign code *Reed* compliant. This is not just a matter of the enforceability and therefore the effectiveness of their sign code, but one of avoiding expensive litigation, as well. While the potential fiscal threat will get the attention of local government officials, many signage researchers will argue that the issues of raised in the other three papers are similarly important, perhaps even more so, in terms of the longer-term impacts of signage on the quality of life of urban residents. Rahman and Mehta, both urban design researchers, bring to the attention of land use planners, attorneys, graphic designers, economic developers and others, perhaps for the first time for many, how signs and their component words, type and letters contribute to a location's sense of place, with consequent implications for sign regulation and how cities revitalize and maintain neighborhoods. Likewise, Fontaine and Bradbury's call for improved signage design and placement to enhance the competitiveness of local businesses deserves greater attention from both sign regulators and those promoting local economic development initiatives. Local governments can and should do much more to guide sign design, with special focus on more effectively utilizing graphic communication tools. Finally, Jourdan, Strauss and Hunter confront an issue of the highest conceptual importance to urban planners, yet one that is inconsistently addressed in real-world applications. Their survey results about public participation practices and their list of best practices will be of interest to many local government planners. Further, their work has significant potential to

better inform responses to *Reed*, as well as support efforts to more effectively utilize sign codes to support strong local businesses while enhancing a neighborhood's sense of place.