

Introduction

Vero Rose Smith

Associate Curator,
Legacies for Iowa Collections-Sharing Project
Stanley Museum of Art
University of Iowa

veronica-smith@uiowa.edu

INTRODUCTION

On a drizzly Saturday afternoon, I pouted in the back seat of my mother's white Ford Fiesta. I was five years old, bored with errands and sulky with little kid-impatience, and had just been denied ice cream. Glowering out the window, I glimpsed a colossal vanilla ice cream cone rising from the roadside weeds. Shimmering in the rain, the monumental frozen treat was a Candy Land board game come to life — I always knew I was secretly Queen Frostine! Of course, this ice cream cone was sculpted from plaster and paint. Candy-clad royal attendants did not whisk me away to my edible throne, and I still didn't procure a treat despite the renewed urgency of my shrieks. This was my first encounter with the enticing power of the shop sign. In a glorious display of literality, this mammoth ice cream cone advertised the dairy deliciousness that awaited dessert-seekers in the tiny stand just beyond.

For as long as goods have been bought and sold, shopkeepers and traders have found visually arresting ways to communicate their wares. However, signs are much more than advertisements. Sometimes, signs (like the giant ice cream cone of my childhood) are the manifestations of desire. Alternately, signs can be textually directive, informing pedestrians and drivers of the wonders awaiting them within the shop. Occasionally, the product functions as its own signage, displayed alluringly for passersby.

Unlike buildings, which are massive and exude a sense of permanence, signs are transitory. Though the structure may remain more or less the same when ownership transitions, signs let us know a shift has transpired - without signs, how would we discern that the greasy pizza place had transformed into an upscale vegan wrap emporium? Often employing design principles apparent in other contemporaneous print and visual media, signs tell us where we are

in time and place.

This special issue of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Signage and Wayfinding* is based on the theme of a recent University of Iowa Stanley Museum of Art exhibition and symposium entitled “What’s Your Sign?” Hosted by the Figge Art Museum in Davenport, Iowa and on view from August 26 through November 26, 2017, the exhibition mined the permanent collections for art works related to the evolution of signage and explored how have symbols of selling shifted over centuries and cultures. Additionally, the exhibition and symposium questioned the ways retail signs reflect or reject broader visual cultures and technological advancements. The articles included in this special issue (some of which debuted in the symposium) examine the iconography, typography, and materiality of retail signs and spaces as well as the cultural, financial, and geo-political forces that shaped storefronts and retail spaces in the past.

Charlott Greub interrogates the branded occupation of space as an aesthetic function of the two films separated by nearly a century. Through a nuanced examination of two films, *Les Nuits Électriques* by Eugène Deslaw (1928) and *site specific_LAS VEGAS 05* by Olivio Barbieri (2005), Greub contends that signage can act as a medium for filmic experimentation and manipulation of reality. In both films, Greub determines that depictions of urban spaces are dependent on dramatically neon streetscapes that demonstrate a relationship between identity and location. Furthermore, the author argues that cinematic appropriates of signage are best understood as a political position in the century rather than as a purely chronological accounting of each individual era represented.

Similarly, Edward Snajdr and Shonna Trinch consider signage in their study of Brooklyn storefronts as a not necessarily linear barometer for cultural shift and complex hyperlocal identities over time. Snajdr and Trinch effectively track the seismic shift of explicitly descriptive and extremely wordy signs to cryptic, minimally textual signs as an indicator of gentrification. The authors argue that the more ambiguous and minimal the shop sign, the more monied and snooty

the target clientele. In this way, the authors contend that retail signage functions as both a social act and a place-making tool with the power to include or exclude.

Furthering the framework of inclusion, Aparna Sundar, Flavia Iglori Gonsales, and Gracie Schafer examine the phenomenon of synchronicity in signage. In their experiments, the authors found that signs exhibiting high degrees of visual rhythm (such as a depiction of a gaggle of geese flapping in the same direction) induce a higher sense of belonging in the viewer. This sense of belonging can in turn be utilized to more effectively disseminate information. For example, the aforementioned sign featuring synchronistic flocking is more likely to convince sign-readers to forgo feeding the geese than a sign emblazoned with disengaged geese content to ignore each other and mill in opposite directions. While the authors acknowledge the limitations of their research, the practical implications of their study may assist the design processes of professionals involved in the production of signage to positively affect emotional and behavioral engagement.

Behavioral engagement is a primary concern in fully enclosed retail environments such as shopping malls, and Craig M. Berger expands the historical context of this retail form in the final paper of this issue. Berger argues that signage precedents established early in mall development have shifted in response to demographic shifts of mall-goers. Echoing the findings of Snajdr and Trinch, Berger asserts that malls have become more segmented by income level in recent decades. This segmentation has resulted in either complete desecration or a new combination of retail, office space, university classrooms, and healthcare facilities specific to the middle-class suburbs that gave rise to the shopping mall decades ago. While many malls have succumbed to ruination, those that have diversified to include amenities beyond retail have transformed into a new commons well-suited for the commuter-lifestyles of the twenty-first century bourgeoisie.

June, 2018