

# Outdoor Advertising: Landmark of the Experience Economy

***Bryce C. Lowery, Ph.D.***

Assistant Professor of Regional & City Planning  
Christopher C. Gibbs College of Architecture  
University of Oklahoma  
bryce.c.lowery@ou.edu

---

## A HISTORY OF ENTERTAINMENT AND EXPERIENCE

Outdoor advertising has long been a feature of the American landscape and a visual indicator of opportunities to be entertained. Outdoor or out-of-home advertising is often distinguished from other types of signs because it appears in a location separate from the good or service it promotes (OAA, 2019). First appearing in the United States around the time of the civil war, early outdoor advertisements often featured unique and memorable experiences such as troupes of entertainers, theatrical performances, and other live shows (Agnew, 1938). Circuses were some of the most prolific and influential advertisers. The traveling shows frequently employed individuals who would go ahead of the performers to secure advertising space with the managers of nearby theaters and opera houses who served as proprietors of early signage (Hendon & Muhs, 1986). They would post images like the one seen in Figure 1, giving local residents a small glimpse of the unique and exotic offerings soon to arrive in town. Signs that were typically used for local events were repurposed during breaks in the seasonal production schedule to welcome shows into cities and towns. These early interactions between local and vagabond entertainers would morph into the modern outdoor advertising industry. Borne from entertainers and associated with cities and towns supportive of the performing arts, outdoor advertising signified an opportunity to experience something fun, interesting, and spectacular.

The connection between outdoor advertising and centers of entertainment continued until about the 1930s when private automobile ownership provided access to new kinds of experiences. The growth of personal transportation and the accompanying network of roadways opened up new

---

## *Abstract /*

Outdoor advertising has a long history of serving as an indicator of opportunities to be entertained. In the United States, early outdoor advertisements often featured traveling shows, circuses, theater offerings, and live acts. As the automobile changed lifestyle trends, billboards followed the new roading experience into suburbs and the countryside. Today, outdoor advertising, clustered in entertainment districts like Times Square, is again seen as a component of the urban experience and a signal of consumer opportunity. Through spatial reorganization, integration into the built environment, and the development of increasingly engaged technologies, outdoor advertising is adapting to the demands for experiential urban life. Signage is being used in new ways to enhance places that are commonly associated with consuming goods and services. As a landmark of the experience economy, signage orients individuals to these locations by defining entertainment districts and drawing attention to opportunities to eat, drink, and have fun.



**Figure 1** / Circus Billboard, 1931, Jacob J. Gayer, National Geographic Image Collection.

sites for the placement of signage along the early American transportation system and ushered in an era of marketing places made accessible through personal auto ownership (Gudis, 2004; Jakle & Sculle, 2004). The automobile brought into being a whole new set of roadside landmarks, including signage and outdoor advertising, that set the visual tone of the American roading experience (Appleyard, Lynch & Myer, 1964). Today, some of these roadside landscapes like Route 66 remain linked physically and mentally to historical, remnant, and existing signs (Caton & Santos, 2007). This shift in the lifestyle of Americans led a withering of the connection between outdoor advertising and central commercial and entertainment districts. As well-off automobile owners were able to relocate into suburban and rural areas, and roadways allowed access to vast areas of scenic areas and wilderness for leisure and tourism, urban experiences drew fewer and fewer visitors.

Today, the roadside remains an important location for outdoor advertising, but contemporary trends toward increasing urbanization and demand for consumer experiences suggests a renewed role for billboards in cities. Urban areas are growing in new ways indicative of increasing demand for consumer-focused living (Glaeser, Kolko, & Saiz, 2001). Preferences for shopping, buying, and experiencing goods (Veblen, 1908; Douglas & Isherwood, 1979) influence the quality of life in cities. Those who plan, design, and build in these urban settings cater to preferences for environments opulent with sensory stimuli, the 21st century version of bright lights, big city. Amenities like outdoor advertising that cater directly to consumer preferences attract attention and contribute to the economic vitality of cities and regions (Glaeser & Gottlieb, 2006). Signs and billboards support and encourage activity by signaling commercial vitality and consumer opportunity.

Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour suggest the importance signs and billboards have in aiding navigation and conveying the meaning of the commercial environment. In *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (1977) the three comment on the significance of signage as an architectural component of the auto-oriented commercial strip.

*“Signs, through their sculptural forms or pictorial silhouettes, their particular positions in space, their inflected shape, and their graphic meaning...*

*identify and unify the megastructure of symbolic connections...*

*communicating a complexity of meaning through hundreds of associations in a few seconds from far away.”* (p. 13)

Often underappreciated, signs and billboards convey information efficiently and make apparent the commercial uses that otherwise would be unremarkable and potentially overlooked. In sites of commercial entertainment like Las Vegas, signs are an integral part of the built environment serving to connect people with historical and contemporary aspects of sites of entertainment.

In this way, outdoor advertising serves as a landmark to help identify locations supportive of consumer activities and opportunity (Lowery, 2014). Landmarks are elements of the built environment that create memorable experiences, help individuals wayfind, and enable orientation by creating a sense of legibility and coherence within immediate surroundings (Lynch, 1960). Outdoor advertising, redesigned corporate plazas, and new skyscrapers physically define these spaces, setting them apart from nearby neighborhoods by creating a sense of economic success and signaling financial resilience in downtowns following a period of decline (Loukaitou-Sideris & Banerjee, 1998). Once believed to be a fantasy relegated to the special effects of cinema, landscapes of outdoor advertising are employed around the world to encourage development and bolster the sustainability of urban land investment (Lopez-Puarejo & Bassell, 2009). Billboards, painted signs, and projected light are being used to spatially define the locations of consumer opportunity. Outdoor shopping centers, theater districts, and nodes of dense, human activity can be accentuated by the lights and activity created by signs.

## THE EXEMPLAR: TIMES SQUARE

One of the most poignant examples of the landscape of the experience economy in the United States is Times Square. In 1916, New York City passed an ordinance that organized and ordered the city into distinct land uses, ushering in the use of local land use control and the era of billboards



**Figure 2** / Times Square, about 1940, Vintage Postcard.

in Times Square (Charyn, 1986). Signs of all shapes and sizes soon covered the area as the intersection of major automobile thoroughfares was transformed from an indistinct series of non-architectural spaces into one of the most powerful images of urban habitat in the world (Huxtable, 1991). Signage became architecture in the bustling entertainment district of New York City as billboards of all shapes and sizes signaled the opportunity for a truly unique metropolitan experience (Tell, 2007). As seen in Figure 2, billboards were trompe l'oeil in this space, extending the constant activity of cars and people on the street using colorful and vibrant advertisements to visually extend the action onto the façades of the buildings, day and night.

Speaking on his visit to the city in 1947, Le Corbusier captures the significance of the square as a physical experience and indelible mental image:

“Everyone has heard about the incandescent path cutting diagonally across Manhattan... Electricity reigns, but is it dynamic here, exploding, moving, sparking, with lights running white, blue, red, green, yellow.

There remains a nocturnal festival characteristic of modern times. I remember that the light filled our ears, and that the intense, powerful color excited us and gave us pleasure.” (p 102)

Nestled far enough away from the posh residents on 5th Avenue, the appearance of Times Square is the result of location and an influential group of individuals who transformed it into a quintessential economic space (Leach, 1991a). The aesthetic of the experience economy markets and sells goods, entices consumption, and generates curiosity (Leach, 1991b). Signs signal the active economic nature of the district by creating a feeling of

“commercial extravaganza” even among the already busy and crowded streets of New York City (Harris, 1991, p. 82). The billboards came to epitomize the environment; enveloping passersby and overpowering the cacophony of economic transactions through spectacle, emotion, and opportunities to experience something incredible.

Even following a period of relative decline, the revitalization of the square and its transformation into the pedestrian thoroughfare of today relied on outdoor advertising. Beginning around the middle of the 20th century, Times Square came to signal a different kind of entertainment as crime, adult venues, illicit drug use, and prostitution epitomized the square, resulting in decades of political promises to redesign and reconfigure the space (Makagon, 2004). Then, in 1992, a renewed vision for Times Square imagined a sort of return to its former grandeur, as a site of entertainment and experience invigorated by flashing lights and glowing signs. Billboards were employed to transform the landscape into vast and sweeping striations of advertisements. Billboards would serve as landmarks of the emerging experience economy; a “model for urban development worldwide,” a place where the signs and lights alleviate “bleakness” by activating the landscape (Robert A.M. Stern Architects, 2013). The billboards in the square are significant precisely because of the experience they provide, allowing visitors to the square to escape the quotidian encounters of everyday life and encounter something spectacular (Makagon, 2004). In this way, the square and its built environment create a collective fascination through a “culture of congestion” where people, material goods, cultural and symbolic meaning assemble to create a resilient image of active urban life (Berman, 2006).

Years later, many of the signs are now digital, lighting up the square with pulsating light and interactive media. Beginning in 2008, local efforts succeeded in converting the once car-dominated square into a pedestrian thoroughfare complete with a viewing platform and outdoor seating so visitors can take in the outdoor advertisements like a museum exhibit (Sadik-Khan, 2016). The lights of outdoor advertising were part of the transformation of the square over the years, supportive of the experience economy and part of making the square the world-renowned locale that it is today.

## THE REORGANIZATION AND CHANGING NATURE OF LANDMARKS OF THE EXPERIENCE ECONOMY

New innovations in outdoor advertising coupled with the spatial reorganization of people and cities offer opportunities to engage in new forms of place making focused on the experience economy. Three trends are suggestive of the future direction of outdoor advertising: 1) increasing emphasis on place and location, 2) sophisticated use of buildings and spaces, and 3) emerging interactive environments (Koeck & Warnaby, 2014).

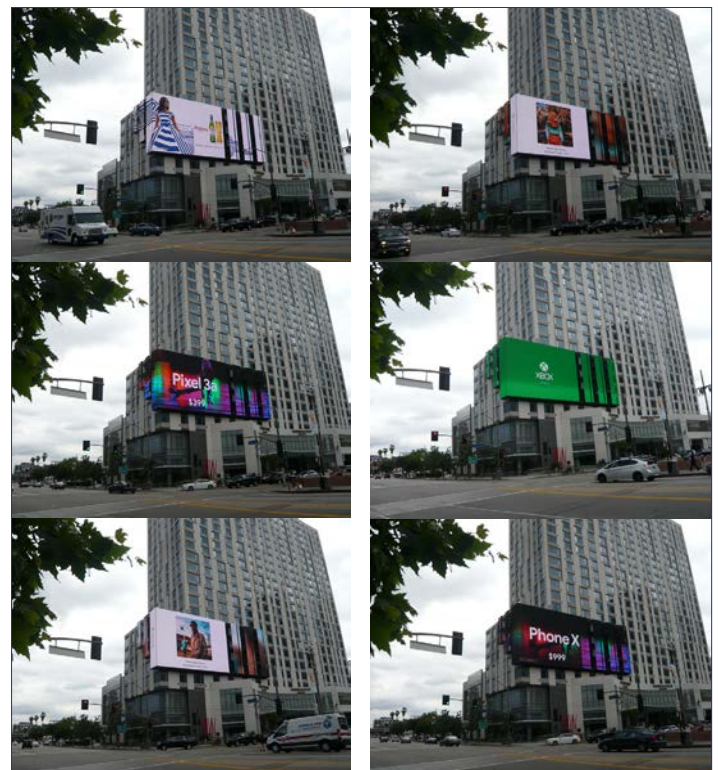
Los Angeles provides one example of a municipality working to organize outdoor advertising spatially within the city. Over the past 20 years the local government has been trying to reach a compromise on a proposal to cluster outdoor advertising, particularly digital signage, around the commercial-oriented regional centers of the city (Lowery, 2016). The centers, shown in Figure 3, are part of a long-term regional plan for the Los Angeles basin that imagined series of interconnected hubs of dense development, high activity, and commerce (City of Los Angeles, 1970). The current proposal would create sign district overlays in each of these areas to transform the polycentric nodes of the city into landscapes of lights, signs, and digital effects.

As seen in Figure 4, outdoor advertising is also increasingly innovative in its application and deployment, allowing for a variety of different messages to appear as part of the architecture. New forms of outdoor advertising improve the integration of signs into the built environment and offer opportunities to plan, design, and create districts dedicated to entertainment. Outdoor advertising is increasingly designed to allow advertisers to connect to consumers more directly, integrating into the surrounding environment and responding to local conditions (Slefo, 2017). Supergraphics affixed to structures, digital screens, and projections provide new ways of thinking about how outdoor advertising and signs can be employed to activate space with light and images. As this collection of articles in designboom suggest—<https://www.designboom.com/tag/billboard-architecture-and-design/>—outdoor advertising is increasingly adaptative and supportive of efforts to remedy climate change, homelessness, and lack of pedestrian affordances in public space. These new design strategies and techniques of demarcating areas of commercial enjoyment can be situated within more traditional models of sign-making to create visually diverse and engaging environments.

New technologies are also leading to increasingly immersive interactive environments that allow new kinds of engagement between consumers and digital media. A notable example involved the use of digital signage to alert passersby of the origin of arriving planes into London Heathrow Airport (Klaassen, 2014). On the ground, outdoor advertising will increasingly serve as a point of sale for marketers, allowing mobile-



**Figure 3 /** Proposed and Existing Sign Districts of Los Angeles, 2019. (Image provided by author.)



**Figure 4 /** Products and art exhibits as part of the architecture of downtown Los Angeles. (Images provided by author.)

based technologies to support purchases instantly through online and physically proximate retailers (Neff, 2015). By engaging wireless technology embedded in mobile devices, advertisements will soon be able to incentivize nearby shoppers (Grewal, Bart, Spann, & Zubcsek, 2016; Inman & Nikolova, 2017) through tailored promotions (Sturari, et al., 2016), suggesting a potentially viable opportunity to employ similar technology in pedestrian-oriented entertainment districts, shopping centers, and sports venues.

These spatial and physical design strategies have important implications for the future of cities. In many ways, changes in the way outdoor advertising is employed within the physical environment provide opportunities to address concerns about the impact messaging and light can have on the well-being of human (Lowery & Sloane, 2014) and ecological communities (Longcore & Rich, 2004). The capacity to program advertising, regulate light, and engage viewers suggests a future for advertising to serve as an agent of social change (Cronin, 2004), and “an art that enhances human and humane values” (Schudson, 1984, p. 242). The adaptability and malleability of the medium of outdoor advertising can serve to both signify the commercial nature of public, as well as

reflect and inspire life and support efforts to create more resilient city form (Cronin, 2008). Innovations in the deployment of outdoor advertising point to the potential for future financial gain and newfound ability to revolutionize urban experiences.

In entertainment and commercial districts, outdoor advertisements have the potential to invigorate space through the deployment of immersive and engaged technologies. Long touted as “the real art gallery of the people” (Poster Advertising Association, 1922, p. 67), today outdoor advertising represents a new form of urban flux, one way of enabling the built environment to cater to contemporary demands for active, experiential, and visually stimulating places (Hack, 2011). Frames and poles once necessary to support posters and billboards are no longer needed to create the supergraphics, projections, and digital displays that serve as landmarks of the experience economy. Outdoor advertising is being used in innovative ways to enhance the quality of life in places that are commonly associated with entertainment, tourism, and the consumption of material goods. As a landmark of the experience economy, signage orients within the built environment by drawing attention to experiential opportunities.

## REFERENCES

---

- Agnew, H.E. (1938). *Outdoor advertising*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Appleyard, D., Lynch, K., & Myer, J.R. (1964). *A view from the road*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Berman, M. (2006). *On the town: One hundred years of spectacle in Times Square*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Caton, K. & Santos, C.A. (2007). Heritage tourism on Route 66: Deconstructing nostalgia. *Journal of Travel Research*, 45(4), 371-386.
- City of Los Angeles. (1970). *Concept Los Angeles: The concept for the Los Angeles General Plan*. Los Angeles, CA: Department of City Planning.
- Charyn, J. (1986). *Metropolis: New York as myth, marketplace, and magical land*. New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons.
- Cronin, A.M. (2004). *Advertising myths: The strange half-lives of images and commodities*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Cronin, A.M. (2008). Calculative spaces: Cities, market relations, and the commercial vitalism of the outdoor advertising industry. *Environment and Planning A: Economy & Space*, 40, 2734-2750.
- Douglas, M. & Isherwood, B. (1979). *The world of goods*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Glaeser, E.L., Kolko, J., & Saiz, A. (2001). Consumer city. *Journal of Economic Geography*, 1, 27-50.
- Grewal, D., Bart, Y., Spann, M., & Zubcsek, P.P. (2016). Mobile advertising: A framework and research agenda. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 34, 3-14.
- Gudis, C. (2004). *Buyways: Billboards, automobiles, and the American landscape*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hack, G. (2011). Urban flux. In T. Banerjee & A. Loukaitou-Sideris (Eds.), *Companion to urban design* (446-462). London: Routledge, 446-462.

- Harris, N. (1991). Urban tourism and the commercial city. In W.R. Taylor (Ed.), *Inventing Times Square: Commerce and culture at the crossroads of the world* (66-82). New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Hendon, D.W. & Muhs, W.F. (1986). Origins and early development of outdoor advertising in the United States. *European Journal of Marketing*, 20(5), 7-17.
- Huxtable, A.L. (1991). Reinventing Times Square: 1990. In W.R. Taylor (Ed.), *Inventing Times Square: Commerce and culture at the crossroads of the world* (356-370). New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Inman, J.J. & Nikolova, H. (2017). Shopper-facing retail technology: A retailer adoption decision framework incorporating shopper attitudes and privacy concerns. *Journal of Retailing*, 93(1), 7-28.
- Jakle, J.A. & Sculle, K. (2004). *Signs in America's auto age: Signatures of landscape and place*. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press.
- Klaassen, A. (2014). British Airways' 'Magic' billboards win direct grand prix at Cannes. *Ad Age*. June 16.
- Koeck, R. & Warnaby, G. (2014). Outdoor advertising in urban context: Spatiality, temporality and individuality. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 30(13-14), 1402-1422.
- Leach, W. (1991a). Brokers and the new, corporate industrial order. In W.R. Taylor (Ed.), *Inventing Times Square: Commerce and culture at the crossroads of the world* (99-117). New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Leach, W. (1991b). Introductory essay: Commercial aesthetics. In W.R. Taylor (Ed.), *Inventing Times Square: Commerce and culture at the crossroads of the world* (234-242). New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 234-242.
- Le Corbusier. (1947; 1937). *When the cathedrals were white: A journey to the country of timid people*. Translated by Hyslop, Jr., F. New York, NY: Reynal & Hitchcock. (Originally published as *Quand les cathédrales étaient blanches. Voyage au pays des timides* by Éditions Plon.)
- Lopez-Puarejo, T.A. & Bassell, M. (2009). The renaissance of outdoor advertising: From Harlem to Hong Kong. *American Journal of Business*, 24(2), 33-39.
- Longcore, T. & Rich, C. (2004). Ecological light pollution. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, 2(4), 191-198.
- Loukaitou-Sideris, A., & Banerjee, T. (1998). *Urban design downtown: Poetics and politics of form*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- Lowery, B. (2014). *The social construction of the experience economy: The spatial ecology of outdoor advertising in Los Angeles*. Doctoral Dissertation. University of Southern California.
- Lowery, B., & Sloane, D.C. (2014). The prevalence of harmful content on outdoor advertising in Los Angeles: Land use, community characteristics, and the spatial inequality of a public health nuisance. *American Journal of Public Health*, 2014(4), 658-664.
- Lowery, B. (2016). Planning for private consumption and collective beauty: Regulating outdoor advertising in Los Angeles, 1881-2014. *Journal of Planning History*, 15(3), 191-209.
- Lynch, K. (1960). *The image of the city*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Makagon, D. (2004). *Where the ball drops: Days and nights in Times Square*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Neff, J. (2015). "Coming soon: Instantly shoppable radio, outdoor and in-store ads." *Ad Age*. June 3.
- OAA. (2019). Outdoor Advertising Association glossary of terms. Retrieved, June 1, 2019 from <https://oaaa.org/AboutOOH/OOHBasics/OOHGlossaryofTerms.aspx>
- Poster Advertising Association. (1922). *Facts about poster advertising and the city beautiful*. Chicago, IL: Poster Advertising Association.
- Robert A.M. Stern Architects. (2013). "42nd Street now!" Retrieved April 26, 2019 from <http://www.ramsa.com/projects/project/42nd-street-now>
- Sadik-Khan, J. (2016). *Street fight: Handbook for an urban revolution*. New York, NY: Penguin Press.
- Schudson, M. (1984). *Advertising, the uneasy persuasion*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Slefo, J. (2017). "Out-of-home ads go programmatic with new pact." *Ad Age*, October 4.
- Sturari, M., Liciotti, D., Pierdicca, R., Frontoni, E., Mancini, A., Contigiani, M., & Zingaretti, P. (2016). Robust and affordable retail customer profiling by vision and radio beacon sensor fusion. *Pattern Recognition Letters*, 81, 30-40.
- Tell, D. (2007). *Times Square spectacular: Lighting up Broadway*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books.
- Veblen, T. (1908; 1899). *A theory of the leisure class: An economic study of institutions*. New York, NY: Macmillan & Company.
- Venturi, R., Scott Brown, D., & Izenour, R. (1977). *Learning from Las Vegas: The forgotten symbolism of architectural form*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.