

# Signage Form and Character: a window to neighborhood visual identity

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## SIGNAGE AS COMMUNICATION

Signage is an important component of place-based communication system and on-premise signage contributes significantly to the experience of place, particularly commercial space, such as a neighborhood business district or main street. Signage quintessentially represents and mediates between what Zukin (1995) calls the visual economy of the landscape and market culture. Signage acts as material traces, providing a direct spatial semiotic—a visual sociology of place (Krase and Shortell, 2011). Beyond their commercial, regulatory, and sensory visual value, signs are symbols: they communicate socio-cultural and political messages.

## SIGNAGE FORM AND CHARACTER

Types and fonts have personalities, traits, and specific qualities. These personalities and qualities convey messages beyond what is expressed within the text of the sign. Scholars and practitioners in marketing, consumer psychology, and communication, and its numerous sub-fields have been studying this for long; almost a century ago, Proffenberger and Franken (1923) identified five atmosphere qualities of fonts: cheapness, dignity, economy, luxury, and strength. More recently, for example, Kostelnick and Roberts (1998) depicted Times New Roman as “bookish and traditional,” Bodoni as “dramatic and sophisticated,” and Goudy as “corpulent and jolly.” Through the personalities and qualities of type, signage then becomes a source of messages and meanings that serves as a form of cultural expression. In his 2012 work *Characters: cultural stories revealed through typography*, Stephen Banham meticulously depicts the signage and typography of a city to present an exuberant collection of quirky, poignant, and often funny stories. Called a “typographic evangelist” by UK design journal *Eye*, Banham reveals how typography is a rich form of cultural expression, redefining the perspective

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## Abstract /

Signs contribute significantly to the visual identity of neighborhoods, often representing the interplay of the collective social, political, cultural and economic values of the people who live and work there. On-premise signs displayed on building facades and storefronts in the neighborhood business district of three distinct neighborhoods in Cincinnati, OH are examined to document the typographic styles and form (material, size and scale, color, etc.) of the signs. An empirical photographic survey is employed for elevation mapping, to record the full range of on-premise signs in each neighborhood business district. Over 150 on-premise signs are documented and analyzed. Our findings suggest that as neighborhoods get gentrified, particularly with non-local capital and investment, the signage form and character, represented by the typeface, shape, material, illumination and other properties, become more homogeneous, replacing the variety of typefaces as well as signage form. The study found that the signage used by the chain stores and other new businesses that are not place based to be mostly all-capitalized, three-dimensional, back-lit, and having other properties that are undifferentiated, generic, and visually monotonous.

## Keywords /

storefront signage; typeface, neighborhood businesses; visual identity; communication.

of our surroundings. Typography, used in signage and other forms on public and private buildings, along roadways, on transit vehicles and stops, in graffiti, advertisements, storefronts, and anywhere visible to us, is a form of intentional communication.

## SIGNAGE AND NEIGHBORHOOD BUSINESS

Neighborhood businesses use on-premise signage for communicating their presence and attracting customers. At the same time, on-premise signs give businesses an opportunity to communicate identities and values which help them connect with certain types of consumers. In the e-commerce economy, many businesses are paying close attention to signage in order to distinguish their businesses as places offering unique, tangible, and rich experiences. Operating in a definite physical space, many of these businesses pay special attention to curating their goods, services, and all communication, including signage, to establish a localness. In doing so, many neighborhood businesses carefully understand and determine the values and preferences of the local neighborhood communities, many of which serve reliable customers and dedicated supporters. Collectively, on-premise signs displayed on building facades and storefronts in neighborhood business districts provide us with a window into the visual identity of the neighborhood. This visual identity is the representation of the interplay of the collective social, political, cultural, and economic values of the people who live and work there.

### Research Focus

By methodically examining and analyzing the collective patterns of signage on neighborhood main streets, this study examines one aspect of the visual identity of the neighborhood revealed through its signage landscape. Specifically, this research examines neighborhood visual identity through an analysis of the form and character (typography, materiality, dimensionality, size and scale, color, and more) of on-premise signage used by businesses on neighborhood main streets. Consequently, the research contributes to our understanding of how sign's words, type, and letters act as artifacts and convey meaning in an urban environment, while also contributing to a neighborhood's sense of place.

## METHODS

### Selection of Neighborhoods

Three neighborhoods in Cincinnati were selected for the study; the neighborhoods were chosen for both their commonalities and the variations. Each neighborhood has pedestrian-oriented commercial streets, with low vacancy rates where businesses display signage. The neighborhoods provide quality infrastructure and conditions for walking to the commercial street as well as ample on-street and lot parking options in the vicinity. Simultaneously, each of these neighborhoods is physically, culturally, and socio-economically unique and substantially different from each other.

Clifton is a historic neighborhood that is diverse, artistic, cosmopolitan, and eclectic. A typical streetcar suburb, it has an urban village feel with historic apartments, homes and mansions along tree-lined streets, many of which are lit by early 20th century gaslight lamps. The neighborhood is home to families, young and old, educators, researchers, artists, professionals, and university students. Ludlow Avenue, the main commercial street, is the center of the neighborhood and supports a collection of shops that offer a variety of retail, eating and drinking establishments, and even a historic theater, all of which cater to the daily needs and wants of the surrounding community (Figure 1).

CUF, an acronym for the neighborhood that represents Clifton Heights, University Heights, and Fairview, is located adjacent to the University of Cincinnati. The parts of the neighborhood closest to the university are predominantly rental properties providing off-campus student housing, with many eating and drinking establishments and convenience stores that are oriented towards students' needs. Most of the historic Clifton Heights Business District has been redeveloped into a mixed-use district with new housing and businesses that cater to university students (Figure 2).

Hyde Park is one of the most affluent neighborhoods in Cincinnati and therefore one of the most exclusive. Many large estates, mansions and stately houses with manicured lawns make up this largely residential neighborhood that has a predominant historic suburban feel; it is home to families considered "old money." At the center of the neighborhood is Hyde



Figure 1 / A view of Ludlow Avenue, the main street of Clifton in Cincinnati, OH.



Figure 2 / A view of Calhoun Street, one of the commercial streets of CUF in Cincinnati, OH.



Figure 3 / A view of Hyde Park Square, the business district of Hyde Park in Cincinnati, OH.



Figure 4 / An example of a part of Ludlow Avenue, the main street of Clifton in Cincinnati, OH where each on-premise sign was accurately sized, located and prominently displayed on the elevation.



Figure 5 / Accurately sizing the on-premise signage. An example of a part of Ludlow Avenue, the main street of Clifton neighborhood in Cincinnati, OH.

Park Square, a charming shopping area with a variety of upscale boutiques, high-end eating and drinking establishments and other chic businesses (Figure 3).

### Study areas

Only on-premise signage installed on storefronts or building facades on the main commercial street of the neighborhood were examined. These included the formal and intentional signage commissioned by the owner of the building or the business owner, but temporary signage, art murals, or graffiti were not included in the study. Over 150 signs were documented in the three neighborhoods.

### PROCEDURES

Each of the three commercial streets were visited during daytime in summer and fall of 2017 and documented by one of the authors. A systematic photographic survey was employed for elevational mapping to record the full range of on-premise signage along the commercial street of each neighborhood. A GIS map of the street was traced and verified with on-site measurements. Canon 60D DSLR camera on a tripod was used and photographs were taken from the opposite side of the street and fixed distance away to achieve an accurate elevational aspect-ratio for photo-stitching. Close-up and wide-angle photographs were also taken to conduct a signage form and character analysis. To generate the final images, photographs were imported in Adobe Photoshop to adjust and edit white balance, darkness, and minor distortion in perspective. Using panoramic photo-stitch, systematic scaled façade elevations were created for both sides of each street. Each sign was accurately sized, located and prominently displayed on the elevation (Figure 4). Lastly, Adobe Illustrator, with software plugin CADtools 12.1.1, was used to create data charts, labelling, and to measure elevational heights, distances, and calculate surface area. The percentage of sign area on the storefront or façade was measured and illustrated (Figure 5).

Once all signs were identified, typographic elements were determined and tallied in the following categories: sans-serif and serif typefaces, and further into their subcategories (Lupton, 2004) of old-style, transitional, Tuscan or decorative, Egyptian or slab serif, geometric, humanist, calligraphic, custom style, etc. For each sign the signage was further categorized by word-count, and uppercase vs. lowercase. Materials, color, and other customizations were documented, along with any use of neon, backlighting, or three-dimensionality of the letters or the whole sign (Figures 6 and 7).

### FINDINGS

#### *Ludlow Avenue, Clifton*

A wide range of signage creates an image of visual variety for the businesses on Ludlow Avenue, the commercial main street in Clifton. Calligraphic, decorated, and custom on-premise signs dominated the signage landscape (Figure 8).



TYPE OF SIGNAGE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	
OLD STYLE (angular)																						
TRANS / MODERN (straight)																						
TUSCAN (decor)																						
EGYPTIAN (slab)																						
HUMANIST																						
TRANSITIONAL																						
GEOMETRIC																						
CURSIVE / SCRIPT																						
CALLIGRAPHIC																						
DECORATED / CUSTOMIZED																						
CAPITALIZED																						
TITLE-CASE																						
LOWER-CASE																						
SINGLE-WORD																						
MULTIPLE-WORDS																						
NEON / LIGHT																						
BUILDING FACADE																						
3-DIMENSIONAL																						

Figure 6 / Categorizing the on-premise signage by elements of form and character. An example of a part of Ludlow Avenue, the main street of Clifton neighborhood in Cincinnati, OH.

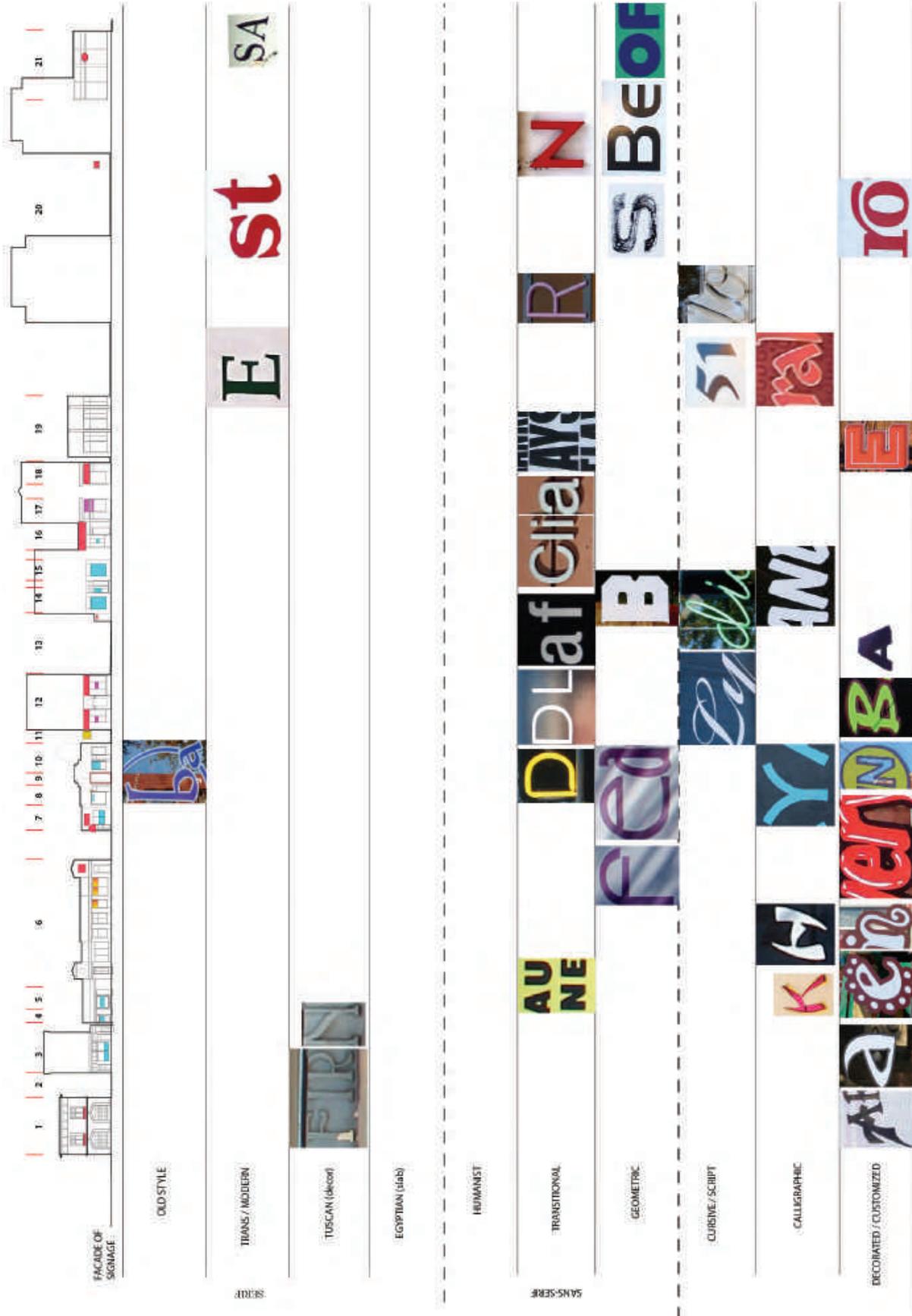


Figure 7 / Categorizing the on-premise signage by elements of form and character. An example of a part of Ludlow Avenue, the main street of Clifton neighborhood in Cincinnati, OH.



Figure 8 / Calligraphic, decorated and custom on-premise signs dominated the signage landscape on Ludlow Avenue, Clifton.



Figure 9 / Signs on businesses in Clifton display a diversity of typefaces including Geometric, Transitional San-Serif, Calligraphic lettering, etc.

The typography of signs ranges from Tuscan to Transitional, along with Old Style Serif to Geometric. Within the Geometric, Transitional San-Serif and Calligraphic lettering, there is plenty of diversity of typefaces, color, and size (Figure 9). Although there is a high preference of Transitional San-Serif typefaces (45%), signs on Ludlow Avenue display a variety of many other types.

There is significant amount of cursive lettering (18%), and 20% of signage is calligraphic, but 34% are decorated and customized typefaces, which is the highest percentage across the documented neighborhoods. There are numerous international restaurants and boutique stores, where typeface choices and styles reflect the tradition of the respective national or cultural background of the business owners.

The majority (75%) of signs are flat, painted or printed on vinyl, with only 14% signs being neon, the least percentage of the three neighborhoods. Overall the signage landscape is internationally diverse, eclectically local, and rooted in its context. The visual identity created by this signage landscape aligns well with the attributes of Clifton as a welcoming, inclusive, tolerant, and diverse neighborhood.

#### *Calhoun Street, CUF*

Calhoun Street in the CUF neighborhood is actively undergoing transformation, as old buildings are being replaced by newer high density development. This revitalization is also changing the types of businesses on the commercial street. The west side of Calhoun Street, reflects previous establishment and retains several small local businesses showcasing a high variety of signage that uses numerous typefaces as compared to the new businesses on the east side of the



Figure 10 / Compared to the local businesses (Drunken Bento / Sushi) on the west side of the Calhoun Street, the new dormitories and chain stores (Mr. Sushi) create a stark contrast with the typeface choices, materials and sizes.

street. Compared to the local businesses on the street's west side, new dormitories and chain stores are in stark contrast regarding typeface choices (Figure 10). In these newly opened businesses, there is only the trace of calligraphic or Tuscan typography in one store.

Further, the signage across all the new development shows little variety in scale, contrast, and texture. 58% of the typefaces used by the businesses here are Traditional Sans-Serif and Transitional ones, collectively resonating “new” business and chain stores, but resulting in a monotonous visual image. Unlike the balanced mix of both Sans and Serif in the older retail stores on the west, the new developments use fonts like Helvetica, with its uniform extrusion and upright Sans-Serif shapes. There is also a gradual transition from the west, to the east, in regards to the increase in three-dimensional lettering either attached to the building surface or the canopy signage. Across the entire street, 50% of signs embrace either a neon flair or backlit hoardings, almost 55% of those are 3-dimensional pliant lettering, all of them are on the newly developed part of the street. To add to the monotony, 81% of the signs, typically brand names, are all-capitalized. Only 4% of the signage are single-word signs, whereas 70% are multiple words.

In order to compete with the new businesses, bigger and better signage have also adorned the older part of the commercial area. Overly populated with information, these older and more locally owned businesses now display signs that are oversized and crudely overpainted, yet forming an essential part of the local charm (Figure 11).



Figure 11 / Some older and more locally owned businesses on Calhoun St. in CUF are displaying oversized and crudely overpainted signs.

### *Hyde Park Square, Hyde Park*

Many of the exclusive, high-end businesses in historic Hyde Park Square evoke a sense of time and aristocratic flair by using Old Style Serifs that first emerged in Europe in the sixteenth century. 30% of typefaces are in Old-style and 20% are Transitional/Modern without any Slab Serif typeface. These typefaces are used on historic buildings, expensive cafés and restaurants, realty companies, and other exclusive stores (Figure 12).

Almost one-third of typefaces are either Geometric or Cursive, aligning with the expensiveness and exclusivity of businesses. San-serifed, slightly rounded Geometric and Humanistic styles are predominant. Geometric Sans Serifs, like contemporary Modern-Serifs, connote simplicity, with primary shapes accentuating the

formal attributes, relating to functional, modern, or minimal (exclusive). They have letterforms based on simple geometric shapes — most popularly the circular ‘O’ and triangular ‘V’ — and address very minimal intervention of irregular/grotesque shapes and encourage optical repetition in typography. Their ultra-modern shapes often compromise legibility at smaller sizes or with tracked typographic layout (bigger spaces between letters in a word). Structured and minimalistic (thin and geometric) typefaces used in the storefront signage directly connote not-everyday and exclusive (Figure 13). More than half of the signs used by the businesses here are capitalized with multi-word names.



Figure 12 / Old Style Serif typefaces are used on historic buildings in realty company signs, and other exclusive retail stores.



Figure 13 / Structured and minimalistic (thin and geometric) typefaces used in the storefront signage directly connote ‘not-everyday’ and ‘exclusivity’.

## DISCUSSION

Our empirical research findings from on-premise signage used by businesses on neighborhood commercial streets provide insights into several aspects of signage, particularly as it relates to neighborhood identity. First, the collective image of on-premise signs used by businesses in the three neighborhoods showcase very distinct visual identities. Second, the businesses in a neighborhood commercial district with even more disparate on-premise signs create a singular identity (or two) that can be examined and critiqued.

Clifton's commercial street comprises several diverse small businesses, including many representing different cultures and international affiliations, that use diverse typeface choices and styles reflecting their respective national and cultural background. The variety of signage forms a coherent language of inclusiveness and diversity that appears more approachable for the diverse set of people that live and visit Clifton, including the many students studying at the University of Cincinnati, located nearby. The visual identity created by this signage landscape aligns well with Clifton's desire to be a welcoming, inclusive, tolerant and diverse neighborhood (Figure 14).

In contrast, on the signs in CUF, through their the typeface, material, dimensionality, size, and color creates

a non-place global identity likely to communicate with and attract the young students from the University who may live, eat, and shop on the street. Collectively, these signs project a clean and streamlined aesthetic that is free from any connection to its location and is proudly ageographic (Figure 15). This signage landscape clearly suggests businesses built on capital that is mobile and transferable. This common corporate image, along with a disinterest with its spatial context, projects a cold and homogeneous aesthetic.

Although a very different neighborhood compared to Clifton, the signage landscape in Hyde Park similarly mirrors the neighborhood's desired identity. The signs have a high typographic variety, but the use of Old Style Serifs and contemporary minimalist typography exude an air of sophistication and exclusivity (Figure 16). The oft-used geometric typeface styles address very minimal intervention of irregular/grotesque shapes and encourage optical repetition in typography. As a primary communication medium, signage delivers a clear message to the reader that the space, goods and services in this business district come at a price and are not for all. Simultaneously, the attempt at unifying identity through standardized green canopies project membership-only "country club" vibe.



Figure 14 / The visual identity created by the overall signage landscape aligns well with the welcoming, inclusive, tolerant attributes of Clifton.



Figure 15 / Examples of clean, homogeneous and proudly ageographic signs with corporate and streamlined aesthetic on Calhoun St. near the University of Cincinnati campus.



Figure 16 / Amidst the typographic variety in Hyde Park Square signs, the use of Old Style Serifs and contemporary minimalist typography project an air of sophistication.

## Limitations of Study

Like much empirical work, this research has limitations resulting from time constraints. In our research, each commercial street was visited only during daytime and examining the on-premise storefront and facade signs after dark would have likely provided other readings that are distinct from the daytime where size, dimensionality, color, typeface, and materiality dominate. Our research was also limited to empirical visual studies of on-premise signage. Surveys and interviews with the business owners would create a better understanding of the intent behind and choices of size, location, and typography. Surveys and interviews could also explain what support or limitations the business owners faced as they worked in the context of their respective business associations, neighborhood covenants, residents' associations or other governing bodies.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have reported the findings from a comprehensive documentation, analysis, and interpretation of typographic taxonomy of on-premise signage on three neighborhoods' commercial streets in Cincinnati, OH. To the best of our knowledge, this method of examining on-premise signage at this level of detail has never been applied before. This is likely because such an empirical inquiry requires a vast investment of time to conduct extensive field work, documentation, and analysis.

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By examining the typography of signs in more imageable and public areas of the neighborhood, such as the commercial street, we were able to get a glimpse of the neighborhood's visual identity. This identity, visible through the typographic taxonomy of on-premise signage presents a reading of the neighborhood. Our research shows that signs can act as powerful communication systems for relaying and representing community values, social practices, and economic trends. Perhaps more importantly, we are finding that reading the neighborhood through signage taxonomy has numerous other benefits for urban designers and planners. This reading elevates the understanding of the neighborhood beyond mere visual and sensory aspects (that occurs as a first reading of signs), to the more meaningful understanding of neighborhood strength and opportunities. Signage taxonomy acts as a powerful evaluative tool that represents the neighborhood's place identity by revealing aspects of economy, power, status, cohesion, and diversity.

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