

Intersection:

Road Signs and Public Art

Ellen Babcock

Associate Professor
Department of Art
University of New Mexico

ebabcock@unm.edu

INTRODUCTION

I live in Albuquerque, a city that grew around a crossing of north/south and east/west paths of commerce and conquest. The Camino Real de Tierra Adentro, (Royal Road of the Interior Land) a trade route linking Mexico City to San Juan Pueblo (Ohkay Owingeh) in northern New Mexico intersected the westerly colonial wagon trails that usurped Native American trading footpaths. The contemporary city tolerates, at its heart, a perpetually humming intersection of interstate highways I-25 and I-40. Known locally as the Big I, the interchange is a colossal stack of curving concrete chutes that channels thousands of motorists a day in near alignment with the cardinal directions. This crossroad of major highways is shifted slightly north and east of the original central intersection of the former Route 66 (now Central Ave.) and the BNSF railroad tracks. This latter intersection continues to officially disperse city addresses into directional quadrants. Mail without the designated quadrant added to an address risks delivery to a house with the same number and street name in an opposite, distressingly far-away corner of this now sprawling city.

Albuquerque is somewhat west of the halfway point between Chicago and Los Angeles, and historically offered an appealing resting/refueling destination for the road-weary traveling along Route 66. Vestiges of a mid-century proliferation of motels and their exuberant signage are still visible along much of Central Avenue, and although dwindling and decaying, the abundance of these artifacts still make up one of the better-preserved stretches of the mother road.

Some readers will remember how a tunneling Bugs Bunny lost his way in Albuquerque, missing a crossroads, erupting to the surface all over



The Crossroads Motel is at the intersection of Central Avenue and I-25, and is now visited not only because of its just-off-the-ramp convenience for highway travelers, but because of its importance on a recent layer added to the map – the site of a memorable *Breaking Bad* Scene.

the globe but never managing to make the “right” left turn at an important crossroad (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e8TUwHTfOOU>).

Tunneling under a place, in unfamiliar territory, without visible landmarks or a GPS system to rely on, you can’t tell where you are, and like a disoriented subway traveler, Bugs comes to the surface, repeatedly to attempt to see where he is. I propose that a tunneling/popping up spatial metaphor can be productively imagined as temporal—the past can be allowed to erupt, to be brought to the surface to remain on it for some time, and to be made clearly visible, in order to better orient



The former Zia Motor lodge sign in 2021, still looming on a vacant lot on Central Avenue, exists in a kind of limbo of survival. Representative of a kind of phantom infrastructure deemed not quite worthy of preservation, but apparently too sturdy, large and iconic to take down, this roosting/nesting spot for pigeons is widely photographed by passersby.

ourselves to current challenges and opportunities, and to consider long term consequences of both historic preservation and public art decision making.

It is not a surprise that static, solidified and hardened representations of past events become a contested issue in the realm of public art—monuments have recently been toppled, and violently fought over because they stamp out, refuse, or suppress the stories of those who were not the victors. In contrast to bronze and granite of typical monuments, road signs are both hard and soft, impervious and



The beloved Hilltop cactus sign, Route 1, Saugus, MA, then and now. Public art programs can learn from the strategies of the business community to simultaneously preserve and renovate iconic road signs. Public artworks can be envisioned as sites of change that also maintain continuity, that become opportunities for grounding narratives of remembering and change in shared space. Sustaining the sign's function as advertising for current businesses parallels maintaining the relevance and communicative potential of artworks in changing cultural contexts.

fragile, with extremely sturdy steel and concrete support structures that elevate and frame softer, more pliable interiors of lexan, vinyl and composite materials—an acknowledgement of the both the aspirations (permanence) and realities (possible failure) of owning a business and a reflection of the differing time scales of individual entrepreneurship and urban planning. Road signs are now commonly understood as re-usable, but many mid-century road signs were not made for re-use, their cabinet designs were irregular and highly specific, and the hand craftsmanship involved in their production more specialized and extensive. The materials that comprise mid-century signs are often valued more highly than those used in current sign production, and many of mostly intact vintage signs are deemed worthy of historically accurate preservation, especially if they are able to be removed from their original location and advertising function into more sheltered environments. Those that remain in their original locations, still widely visible and accessible, offer unique opportunities as sites for public art because of their combination of changing and unchanging features.

ROAD SIGNS AS SITES FOR PUBLIC ART

Old road signs, especially larger, sturdier ones whose support structures are still intact but whose vintage lettering and neon are either too decayed or too problematically specific to preserve, offer public art programs an opportunity to rethink three-dimensional public artworks as sites more akin to galleries than stand alone, immutable works of genius. Valued artworks are still assumed to be the product of



Reviver, 2012-2019. Friends of the Orphan Signs (FOS), a small non-profit arts organization, worked with the City of Albuquerque Public Art program to revitalize this sign with artwork created in collaboration with local high school students. The sign was removed and stored when the lot was finally developed in 2019, the city is storing the artwork for eventual display in a planned Route 66 visitor center. Reviver's seven year existence in situ satisfied time requirements for publicly funded semi-permanent artwork, and garnered the artwork enough fans to bolster the decision to save it.



The Sundowner Lion's Whisper project, in development. FOS worked with the City of Albuquerque Public Art program and members of New Life Homes, a residential community that supports people transitioning from difficult situations including incarceration and rehab, in order to develop the imagery for this sign at the site of a motel on former Route 66. The lower cabinet will include reader board tracks for changeable letters displaying messages collected from the residential community. The tree nearby, although it partially obscures the sign, is very highly valued for its shade in this sun drenched city. The lion and the text will be visible seasonally and to those walking nearby, "whispering" to the observant and to those who know where to look.

unique, individual perspectives, and detractors of public art often consider the genre a lesser form because it necessarily involves legal limitations, institutional approval and revision processes, and thus multiple or communal perspectives that "dilute" the artwork. Empty road signs as sites for public art provide a unique opportunity to model an inclusive public art approach that also values historic continuity, a palimpsest of sorts that leaves traces of the past as well as room for new eruptions.

The already spatially and temporally contextualized sites of road signs as places for public art offer a model that is not-neutral because most viewers assume that a sign is meant to directly communicate to a broad, moving public, and that the content is likely to be about wayfinding, products and services, or public service messaging. Art in a sign is not detaching itself from everyday activities, it elbows itself into an often crowded field of text and images in an adamantly not-white-cube, non-elite space. A sign that offers revolving temporary exhibitions of art works can be an accessible plein air gallery that takes advantage of the sturdiness and inherently super-visible nature of road signs.

Among the artists FOS engaged to reach broad audiences via road signs were the well-known local muralist Nani Chacon and poet Sara Rivera. These established artists tended to align their ongoing interests with the opportunities signs afforded them—Nani extended her interest in developing portraiture and an iconography of indigenous leadership by working with teens to imagine the patron saint of travelers, St. Christopher, as an elder who would be familiar to them.

Sara Rivera brought her involvement in language and translation to the FOS Donut Mart project. This unfunded project utilized the few letters remaining on the business sign's readerboard after the business had closed as a starting point for messages to the public. Sara ran an algorithm that listed all of the words that could be formed from the few remaining letters, in both Spanish and English, and since the sign was within easy reach from the ground a team of artists changed messages regularly. The modest project received outsized recognition due to its location at a busy intersection with lengthy stop lights. A local critic writing about public art in Albuquerque featured the project as her favorite artwork in the city, and one of Sara's Donut Mart messages, photographed and posted on Twitter by a passerby who titled it "American Gothic", went viral on Twitter, with thousands of retweets in 2018.



St. Christopher, by Nani Chacon, working with Highland High art students, 2014.

Integral to the mission of FOS is artistic collaboration explored as a range of possible structures. In established educational settings, FOS artists worked with teens from local public high schools as part of the regular art class curriculum, and formed after-school art clubs specifically to work on sign designs. Lindsey Fromm directed the Elevation project, working with children at a preschool, collaging photos of the children, their drawings and selected quotes for a series of artworks installed in a sign near the school.

Other models of engagement employed by FOS include inviting teams of artists to work together with members of an existing community group living near an orphan sign

not found



44

in order to generate images and texts for that sign. The Casa Barelas project paired the bilingual artist Cristine Posner with a neighborhood association with a primarily Spanish speaking membership. Cristine asked participants to bring snapshots and important artifacts from their household collections to digitally scan as part of the initial stages of the image making process.

Themes explored by community groups were not pre-determined by FOS—but emerged from conversations with participants. Often these groups eventually focused



The Wild is Always Breathing On You, Lindsey Fromm working with preschool children, 2021.



The Casa Barelas sign during installation, 2016. The image on the sign features a photo of one of the participant's husband in his military uniform flanked by scanned images of his medals.

on public memory discussing the ways in which images of a past event displayed in relic infrastructure can become an important symbol for a community. Even if displayed only temporarily, these images can strengthen a shared sense of identity and history. When the planned life of a sign image is measured in terms of weeks and months rather than years, artists can respond to the specifics of the sign's site as well as its history, knowing that they are potentially reaching a very broad audience while consciously inserting their work into a succession of images. Vintage road signs have a particular appeal to long-time residents of a place because they are effective memory prompts that are shared by a community and are not usually or commonly associated with traumatic or controversial events. Seeing these familiar signs continually revitalized with vibrant new imagery can reassure communities that connections to the past can be maintained at the same time that new perspectives are considered.

Although FOS does not systematically collect information about how are projects are received by the community, we do compile anecdotal evidence of public interest in these projects. Images of our projects show up often in social media and comment threads attest to enthusiastic support. We were excited to find that a lingering video shot of The Reviver sign was featured on Anthony Bourdain's Albuquerque episode of *Parts Unknown*. FOS artists are continually approached by for information about our projects by journalists and art writers, and are often about invited to participate in art exhibitions. FOS projects are regularly funded by an array of governmental and private sources, and since there continues to be no shortage of empty and orphaned signs in Albuquerque—we look forward to continuing this work throughout the city and proposing it as a public art model for other cities with a surplus of empty signs.



The Revision project. FOS, digital print on vinyl, 2020. During the pandemic FOS artist/educators worked with the Albuquerque museum photo archives to select and edit images that were sent to local poets. The poets created text inspired by the image this artwork pairs an image selected and edited by Sara Rivera and a text written by Beca Aldrete Baca, the mood of the artwork recalls the earlier one installed in the same site.



The Casa Barelas sign during installation, 2016. The image on the sign features a photo of one of the participant's husband in his military uniform flanked by scanned images of his medals.