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Main Street at the American Sign Museum. Source: American Sign Museum



# Introduction

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This issue of the Interdisciplinary Journal of Signage and Wayfinding begins the second half of our first decade of publication as the only academic journal dedicated exclusively to signage and wayfinding research. Since Volume 1, Number 1 of IJSW was posted in December 2016 much has happened in the world, with significant advances in signage and wayfinding digital technology, and signage research methodologies, specifically (e.g. wearable eye-tracking hardware). And of course, the unforeseen and devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have led to multiple low- and high-tech innovations in visual communications that have raised numerous and interesting research questions.

This issue of IJSW celebrates our sixth year by “Looking Back, Looking Forward and Recognizing the Importance of Signage Research” and begins with an extended interview with Jim Weinel. While those involved with signage research in the U.S. will recognize Jim, and his late wife Sharon, as ardent advocates for science-based academic signage research, others may gain new insight to their important roles. Indeed, it was through the generous support of Jim and Sharon Weinel, together with the vision and the organizational acumen of Dawn Jourdan, that the Academic Advisory Council for Signage Research and Education (AACSRE) and this journal (IJSW) became a reality. The interview with Jim seeks to reveal his vision for how rigorous academic signage and wayfinding research can contribute to the improved design, placement and regulation of signs as part of enhancing the critically important social functions they serve.

The other contributions to this issue have been selected to reinforce this understanding of the importance of the Weinels’ support for signage research, and how the resultant research is having important

impacts. Dawn Jourdan's article on the origins of AACRSRE and IJSW builds on and complements the interview with Jim Weinel by explaining the need for and recent history of academic signage research. Charles (Ray) Taylor contributes a systematic overview of the multidisciplinary nature and broad impacts of the signage research that has arisen from AACRSRE and been published in IJSW as a result of the Weinels' support. Similarly, Steve Kopp's review of the many successes of the AACRSRE's Emerging Fellows Program, supported by the Weinels and prosperous under Kopp's leadership, provides insight to the need for such forward-looking programs to continue to attract bright new scholars to the signage research field. Chris Auffrey's article about the emergence of the American Sign Museum under Tod Swormstedt's leadership and the Weinels' support, emphasizes the importance of the institution for signage and wayfinding research. It also highlights how the American Sign museum and similar institutions help provide a social as well as academic understanding of the past, present and future roles of signs.



American Sign Museum Exterior Entrance at Night.  
Image Credit: Wayne Clause; Source: American Sign Museum





Jim Weinel and Sharon Weinel. Source: Gemini. Inc.

# An interview with Jim Weinel: Looking Back, Looking Forward and Recognizing the Importance of Signage Research

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In the early 1960s, with \$150 of start-up cash, Jim and Sharon Weinel rented 400 square feet of space in a garage, and together began what is now one of the great successes of the American sign industry. Their company, Gemini Inc., based in Cannon Falls, Minnesota is one of the largest producers of dimensional letters in the world (Clark, 2013).

Jim and Sharon have been called the embodiment of the American dream (Keane, 2009). They took a chance, and with their hard work and determination based on their innate intelligence, strong business ethic and determination to treat customers and employees as they would want to be treated themselves, they created a successful business that has both impacted and been impacted by the U.S. sign industry. Their business model was straightforward: they provide a high-quality product with excellent customer service at a fair price, with delivery to the customer as quickly as possible. It was in this way that they created Gemini, Inc., a nationally recognized leader in the custom manufacturing of made-to-order dimensional signage, plates, plaques, cast bronze monuments, and industrial protective cases for the signage industry. Gemini is now a second-generation company that has been in business for nearly 60 years. With headquarters in Cannon Falls, MN, the company employs more than 1,100 workers at 18 plants (Shearer, 2022).

Given their success as part of the signage industry, Jim has commented on numerous occasions how “the sign industry has been very good to us” (Auffrey & Mehta, 2021). Apart from their seeming instinctively generous nature, this desire to see the U.S. sign industry continue to thrive despite changing tastes, technology and regulation may best explain why “giving back” to the sign industry has been an important focus of Jim and Sharon’s

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### *Keywords /*

signage; signage research; sign museum;  
Gemini Inc.



philanthropy. Given Jim's engineering education at the University of Minnesota, he has a strong appreciation for the importance and impact of academic research. Jim appreciates the potential of using independent academic research and its resultant understandings to inform consequential decision making for some of the most prominent issues facing the U.S. signage industry.

As a result, Jim and Sharon Weinel have generously and strategically invested in a number of significant signage research initiatives. They were major supporters of the Signage Foundation, Inc., and sponsors of a series of National Signage Research and Education Conferences (NSREC) that brought together an interdisciplinary group of academics from marketing, design, planning and transportation engineering programs with sign industry researchers and professionals. About the same time the Weinels chose to endow two signage research chairs at the University of Cincinnati: one in marketing in the College of Business, and the other in urban planning in the College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning (Swormstedt, 2014).

The Weinels subsequently endowed the Academic Advisory Council for Signage Education and Research (AACSRE) and its major initiatives, such as the Emerging Fellows program focused on creating a pipeline of young scholars engaged in innovative research on signage and wayfinding topics, and its flagship publication, the Interdisciplinary Journal of Signage and Wayfinding. AACSRE is a 501(c)(3) not for profit organization focusing on providing independent thought leadership to advance the knowledge base impacting on-premise signage (AACSRE, 2022).

In a similar fashion, the Weinels came to appreciate the importance for the U.S. sign industry of the work of Tod Swormstedt in the creation of the American Sign Museum. The museum exists today in its current form as a nationally acclaimed institution based on Tod Swormstedt's vision and tenacity, and the major support for that vision from the Swormstedt family, and Jim and Sharon Weinel. There is a well-documented academic literature on the importance of museums for preserving and communicating the importance of historical artefacts, events, and trends to the public as well as researchers

(Suarez & Tsutsui, 2004). As such, museums provide an understanding not only about the past, often in engaging ways, but situate that understanding to help us prepare for the future. In this regard, the Weinels have recognized through their support, the American Sign Museum offers a unique opportunity to engage a broad interested public in a better understanding of the history, function, technology, and aesthetics of on-premises signage in the U.S. As such, visitors to the museum are expected to develop an appreciation of signs as expressions of art and culture, in addition to being drivers of commerce. Fundamentally, the museum provides visitors a personal experience with signs that may ultimately inform public decision-making processes regarding signage design, aesthetics, safety, and regulation.

Given Jim Weinel's catalytic role in supporting academic research about signage, in August 2021, an interview was conducted with Jim to explore his thinking about signage research. The publication of the resulting transcript is intended to inform signage researchers about those aspects of Jim Weinel's life experience and perspectives that have served as a major source of support for independent academic signage research over the past two decades. Indeed, it has been these experiences and perspectives that have made possible this independent academic journal dedicated to signage research.

Ultimately, the interview sought to explore Jim's perspectives about signage research and the role for signage in leading and reacting to the changes in social norms and technology. This reflects an understanding of the signage industry's past over the past 60 years as well as sets the stage for what is likely to be an increasingly important role in the future. The transcript below is the result of that interview.



**TELEPHONE INTERVIEW WITH JIM WEINEL (JW)**

**DATE: AUGUST 3, 2021**

**INTERVIEWERS:**

**CHRIS AUFFREY(CA) AND VIKAS MEHTA(VM)**

**CA** You have been a huge supporter of signage research in academia. Yet, other leaders, industry leaders, have been less supportive. Why have you been so supportive of academic research, and why have other signage industry leaders been less supportive?

**JW** That is a very difficult question to answer. I can answer my part, but I find it difficult to answer for anyone else because I have really worked to get support for signage research. I just got nowhere, and I can't understand it. But let me say this, that without the sign industry we wouldn't be talking today. The sign industry has treated me very, very well.

**JW** Over the years a lot of the letter manufacturing in this country has consolidated, particularly with stainless steel letters. Also, the form letter business has consolidated because using acrylics requires the use of a ring form. This means you had to have a vacuum form plus a ring that comes down around the letter. This can be expensive to put in place, plus many companies couldn't recycle the acrylic.

There is a lot of scrap from making acrylic letters. At Gemini we bought an extruder to extrude the scrap and then recycle it. By doing this we have an advantage that makes it difficult for others to compete with us on a cost basis. We became the low-cost producer. That's how we were able to consolidate much of the manufacturing of form letters.

We started the cast metal letter business almost thirty or thirty-five years ago. And there again, we worked hard to become a low-cost producer. By doing this we were able to consolidate that part of the industry, and it's been very good for Gemini. We support signage research because it is important for the signage industry. It is that simple. This is way we can give back to an industry that has been very good to us.

Now, why don't other parts of the industry do

more to support academic research? There are certainly some large companies that do billions of dollars' worth of business in the sign industry, and some do support research to some degree. And yet, I don't understand why those who are clearly able don't do more to support academic research. It's all very puzzling to me. I don't have a clear answer to your question.

**CA** Okay, well let's move on then. What do you see as the current signage issues where academic research can be useful?

**JW** Well, let me go back a few years to a registration table in Oklahoma City. And, there we hatched an idea between Patti Herman and Dr. Dawn Jourdan, whom you both know. We talked about how one of the problems facing the sign industry is that the various groups involved often fight amongst ourselves. We didn't respect one another. City planners didn't respect sign people and sign people didn't respect city planners. The planners who wrote the codes were adversaries of the sign companies for a good length of time. If we had to describe the intensity of disagreement between sign industry and the sign regulators on a scale of one to ten it would have been an eight. Right now, through the work of AACCSRE and others, we're now down to a four. The disagreement isn't completely gone but it is greatly reduced. And I think AACCSRE has had a great influence on that. I think they will have more influence as years go by. City planners now realize how signage is an extremely important part of the success of cities, and that wayfinding is critical. Does that answer your question?

**CA** Yes, thank you.

Are there other signage issues on which you would like to see more research?

**JW** I can't think of anything other than the work that the University of Cincinnati did some years ago on the importance of moving power lines so motorists could see the business signs. I will never forget that piece of work in a suburb east of you.

**CA** Yes, it was about Beechmont Avenue in Anderson Township.

**JW** I think so. On the main commercial street there was an issue about the signage and how hard it was for motorists to see.

**JW** Well, the work at UC, I forgot who was in charge of that project.

**CA** Professor Menelaos Triantafyllou was the lead researcher on that study.

**JW** And they took out the power lines and buried them, you know. The result was like the difference between day and night looking down that street. I think more studies like that could be very valuable for places where they need to make it easier to see the signs and help businesses to be successful by doing simple things such as putting utilities underground if they can and putting that in the development code. I think you need to do more work along those lines and publicize more of that.

I also think there are probably other issues that I am not aware of. We seem to have exhausted the research about LED signage, and that seems to have settled into a pattern now nationally. From what I read, there's no longer wars being fought over digital signs anymore. I think cities have learned that digital signs can be a good thing by allowing changes, you know, a fresh message. This is particularly true since LED signage has come so far. The quality of the displays has improved tremendously. There is some beautiful stuff they can display now. Beautiful things. That would be the only thing I can think of right now.

**CA** Then let me change the topic a bit. I have a copy of your book, *Made True*, and I really enjoyed reading it. I want to ask about something from the book. A lot has changed in the signage industry since you and Sharon purchased Gemini for "\$150 & a pile of assumed debt" in 1963.

Back when you started Gemini Signs, what were the things that helped Gemini to become the successful business that it is today? You've already touched on the idea of being much more efficient by extruding and being able to reuse the resin with the cast letters. What are the other things that helped make Gemini successful?

**JW** We have succeeded by reinvesting literally every nickel we made. And never buying anything we couldn't pay for. The banks have never made a nickel off us, basically since 1985, and then, and that was just payroll money that would be paid back by Tues-

day. So, the bank was never a partner in our business. Nor was anybody else taking money out. I never took much money out either. For the first two, two and a half years I took zero. And then, for the next several years I took three hundred dollars a month.

And then, when things really were rolling, [laughs] I went to thirty thousand, and that was ten years or more after we started and, my top pay, was always less than about five or six people in the company [laughs]. I have no need for money, never have had. So, we can say that we didn't have a bank partner and we invested every nickel we had and could make back into the business, and it was just that simple. There wasn't anything complicated.

**CA** You're trained as an engineer, isn't that correct?

**JW** Yes, I trained as a civil engineer and my master's work I did was in sanitary engineering. As an engineer my first response was to reinvent everything we ever made. We wanted to know how we can do this better, how we can do it more efficiently.

And YES, I was definitely afraid of debt, and there's a simple reason for that. My father, when he was making twenty-five cents a day and they unionized and I think his pay went to fifty cents a day, which was staggering because pork was a nickel a pound you know. And they worked, they lived on farms and took care of cattle while he worked on the railroad and so their expenses were pretty small. And he bought a home in 1941 and the home was built for \$300 dollars in 1933 and he bought it for \$800. But there's a rule of the railroad that if you got garnished, you would be terminated. So, very few railroaders ever owed any money.

But if you think about it, a railroader has access to a lot of money, a lot of goods, a lot of services, a lot of things along those rails, in those cars. So, they needed people they could trust. And that's kind of the way I grew up. Don't owe any money. Just don't owe money. So, we never did owe any money except when we burned down, and a fellow loaned us thirty-five thousand dollars. Let me tell you we paid that off as soon as we could and that took us fifteen years to get that paid off after the fire.

**CA** That was an interesting part of your story, how you bounced back from the fire.

**JW** Yeah, we didn't carry any insurance because insurance was a luxury.

**CA** Okay, well please let me move on. Are there one or two things that you did not know before and have learned over the years while operating Gemini that have helped make Gemini successful? You knew about the problems of debt before you started Gemini. What did you learn while operating Gemini?

**JW** Yeah, very simple, very simple. That is a very simple answer. You know, being an engineer, with no offense to either one of you. We're not known as shrewd business guys. We leave that to the attorneys and the accountants. But engineers are never the norm for business. So, I said, when I got started, boy, I don't know up from down. While I was in engineering school, I had never heard the words "backlog," "shipments," "profit," "loss" or "personnel." You can go through the laundry list of business terms, it's a half a block long, and I had never heard the business words once in five and a quarter years of engineering school. Well, we've changed that now. The University of Minnesota now teaches entrepreneurship to engineers. They now teach basic business fundamentals to engineers. How to write a proposal and all those things.

But when I started Gemini, I knew that since I don't know anything about running a business that I'd better find people who do. And I was very lucky to find a distinguished group of people who became directors of the company. We had the vice-president of sales for the Pillsbury company on our board. We interviewed one of the vice-presidents of General Motors if you could believe that. And he was going to take it and he said, well, I've just got too much on my plate. He was in Detroit at the time and uh, he was a marketing guy. We've got a top attorney.

And how did we bond all these people together? Very simple thing. We told them we will take them fishing once a year, for a week. And you would be surprised how many people in this country do not have a long-term fishing buddy that loves to fish. So, over the course of the last fifty years our board has fished from Chile to the north, to the ice packs. From the Amazon to Orinoco. You name it, we've fished there. And it was a great group of people, though we're slowly losing them, as you know

we all age. But Fred is carrying on the tradition of recruiting a great group of directors, and and they're paid by a fabulous fishing trip each year [laughs], where they can go and visit and spend a week doing what they like to do. I really believe that has been a major secret to our success. The Board of Directors. I could call them about any issue. And you'll be surprised, the higher people get in the company, most times, the humbler they become. I think you will probably find that at the university level too. Did I answer that question?

**CA** Yes, you did, thank you. Please let me follow up by asking more about the signage industry. If you had to name the most important innovations in the signage industry over the past 58 years, since you started Gemini in 1963, what would, what would be those innovations?

**JW** I think the greatest innovation was brought to the industry by a firm called Gerber Technologies. They introduced computer software to the sign industry and now it is standard operating procedure. Everyone has computers. Now everyone can create a printout of what a sign would look like before you build the sign. It has revolutionized the sign industry. It has revolutionized our business. Now any size sign company in any small town in America can look at the thousands of type sets and type styles.

It helped us at Gemini where we must react to customer requests and make signs for their spec. So being able to do that with the Gerber software has been just outstanding. I can't imagine how we ever got along without it. Before computers could be used, all sign painters would paint up a sketch of a sign. Just think of the labor, and the skill that was required for that. And now you can sit there at your computer and have software that will do all that for you.

**VM** Jim around when was that? Was it in the 1990s?

**JW** Oh no, no. That was in the seventies. It started in the seventies, and it grew just like wildfire into the eighties, nineties and by, I would say, by the 2000s if you didn't have a computer in the sign industry you would be in trouble. Nowadays, I don't think you could even be in business unless you were a pinstriper.

Those people will live into eternity. The



pinstriper was one of the most fascinating parts of signage, because they were a select group. They'd have their own gatherings, and they'd paint for fun. They just enjoyed their work; they were artists. But unfortunately, they are a dying breed. They are hard to find. There's a pocket of them up in Ontario, and for whatever reason there is a small town on Lake Huron, and there must be four or five people within ten miles there that are just outstanding pinstripers. So that's a specialty that has survived!

**VM** What have been the greatest challenges for the signage industry within the last fifty or sixty years?

**JW** The greatest challenge I would say probably was the sign codes. They became very, very restrictive. We had codes that said you couldn't have a sign more than twelve inches high. Many cities went to that. There were some very restrictive sign codes, though many cities are relaxing them now because they are starting to understand how important signage is for a city's economic well-being.

It makes me think of the research done at UC about the car dealer in Kansas City located along the freeway. I will never forget that, where a Chevy dealer put in an LED sign and his business doubled. It was just, things like that, it's just, so remarkable. So, signage has gone through the centuries from being an art form to an important tool for economic development and wayfinding.

Also there have been some things tried during my career that didn't work. One was the signs on awning. Awning signs became popular around 1980 or something. Maybe 1975 or somewhere in there. They were the fad of signage. The awning sign people just went berserk with the business they had. But it didn't last long. They went out of business for the same reasons they did before that; because awning signs were really the only kind of signage you had in small towns in America or even larger towns in America. Awnings with painted lettering and a hanging fringe were everywhere. But wind and hail, and sea water and other elements were hard on awnings. They have died away for the most part, I hardly see awning signs anymore.

Then sign companies went to foam letters. Foam was the panacea. It was the way to make something very inexpensively. Though that early foam has pretty much disappeared; now we have the much better-quality high-density foam. That old foam just rotted away, and the birds ate it. It was pretty funny. You could go to Chattanooga, Tennessee, for example, and all you would see were foam letters. And they would turn black. It was polyurethane and open cell polyurethane, and you can imagine how that fared. The weather would get the best of them, and they'd turn black. Not surprisingly they've about disappeared. You just don't see them anymore.

And that was good for Gemini because we never did follow that path. We saw early on that the foam letters wouldn't last so we get in it.

**VM** Jim, one thing just to follow up. You mentioned a very important point that one of the biggest challenges for the sign industry was sign codes and so, how do you think that the sign industry, or the business-people wanted to use signs; how did they overcome the challenge of regulation?

**JW** Well, I think academia had a good part of that. I think that researchers would write papers and spread the word that gee whiz, the sign is too small, and no one can see it.

There are academics at Penn State who came up with a new code based on distance and readability. Gemini supported research there for quite a while with their transportation research center. They do a lot of US Department of Transportation research and showed that sometimes sign letters need to be bigger if you wanted drivers to see them.

The quality and durability of signs is another factor. There are very few junk signs out there anymore; you just don't see many of those. You know the kind that was made from polystyrene? You remember that they all turned yellow in the sun and cracked. They were part of a passing fancy. So, the improved quality of signs has helped a lot too, in the same way. You just don't see many junk signs anymore. Most business owners have learned that it pays to spend money on quality signage. I think academia has had a lot to do with that.

**CA** So, given that, what are the current challenges

for the sign industry?

**JW** I talked with someone from Daktronics yesterday and tried to help him sell a church sign. I asked how's business and he said, "for goodness sakes we can't keep up." Neither can we, I said., we're just swamped as well. One day last week we were at two hundred percent of production. And that's tough for us, because delivery is really important in the sign industry. Critically important.

So, what are the current challenges, I really don't know. Fred would probably have a better handle on that than I would because he's more attuned to the last couple, three years. I talked to him yesterday about this call. I said Fred, I feel unprepared to speak on these subjects. He said no, he said you can speak on almost any subject except maybe the last year or so of this pandemic. He said that there are things that happened that you don't have any experience in, and I said that's right. You know what's happened in the last few years.

**VM** When I spoke to you briefly in April, you told me that sales were out the roof, and you couldn't keep up with demand. I was wondering if the demand is for the same products you were selling before the pandemic, or was it for somewhat different products?

**JW** No, the products are essentially the same but with a big complication. With the advent of the computer and internet, a sign company in the smallest town in Ohio can pick a font, from thousands of fonts. They can pull them up their computer and the client looks at it and says, "that's the one I want." Then they send the order to us, and we must produce exactly as they want it. If you want to stay in business you have got to produce what the customer wants. So, producing this wider range of fonts has been a big change, but so far, we have managed to keep up. But as for the challenges for the future, I'm not sure what they will be. Fred might have a better handle on that. I don't know where this goes, I really really don't know other than I know that signage is not going to go away and it's probably going to play a larger role in our lives. Wayfinding is terribly important, as you know.

Never heard the word wayfinding up until twenty thirty years ago or so, and now it's common. Good

wayfinding systems in buildings is essential. You know, "where's the men's room." Kind of important stuff.

**CA** Is the industry concerned about the wayfinding on people's phones? If you want to go to a restaurant or store that you've never been to before, most people will look on their phone to get the directions there and you can ask the phone to give you audio directions. Your phone will tell you to go to the corner and take a left.

**JW** We all use that, but we still need wayfinding when we get inside the building.

**CA** You are right.

**JW** You know that the quality of interior wayfinding has improved a lot. You can see that in motels and in almost any building that's been built nowadays. Wayfinding codes are pretty strong once you are inside buildings and that is a good thing because the cell phone doesn't help you once you get inside.

**CA** So, your point is that the sign industry doesn't feel threatened by cell phone technology?

**JW** I can't imagine why they would, and I can't imagine that the signage on freeways is going to change at all. You still need a sign a half a mile down the road when you are travelling 65 or 70 miles an hour that says 4th Avenue is the next exit. Things like that, that's not going to change. Just look at the intersection (I-71 & MLK Ave.) and how that's changed.

Yeah, and I'm kind of proud of that because we worked on that with the with the American Sign Museum. UC worked on that for many years to try to get a decent exit.

**JW** That's about all I can say about the future. I don't know what challenges are going to lie ahead. I can't see legislation; the country is preoccupied with all kinds of stuff, and I always say we ought to move to Cincinnati the center of signage. Can you imagine going to a senator nowadays and talking signage to him? He would look at you like, are you cracked. We've got issues that put our very nation at risk and they're not going to listen to signage stuff.

**CA** Hopefully some elected officials are educated about the importance of signage to you but you are likely correct about many politicians' relative priorities.

**JW** Oh I think many are aware of the importance of signage, but it is still low on their list of priorities right now as far as doing anything. You know, look at the brouhaha with the billboards. Well, go down the highway nowadays and we've got more of them than we've ever had.

**CA** Yes, you're right.

**JW** But at least they are better quality than they used to be.

**CA** Let's move on a little bit more. We've talked about the current challenges. Do you see an issue with the inexpensive imported signage from parts of the world where signs can be produced very inexpensively? Is that a threat to your industry?

**JW** Up until about 5 to 10 years ago, all stainless-steel letters were produced in Thailand. More specifically, in Bangkok, on the outskirts in factories that were two stories tall. The second story was living quarters for the help. The first story was about the factory. They shipped letters, stainless-steel letters, out of there to a competitor in Boston and Trumbull, Connecticut. That went on for years. Gemini looked at the industry and said, you know, we better get into this business and we need to make them in the US because all the complaints we would hear about when there might be a mistake. In about 6% of all orders there's a mistake, because the sign industry is still a verbal business. If you think of the thousands of combinations of possible colors, materials and fonts. Really, not just thousands, but many, many thousands. Add to those other issues related to mounting methods, and it's easy to see things can get very complicated.

Now consider when a sign company in Cincinnati calls a supplier and assumes the person on the other end of the line knows what they're talking about. And the person at the supplier taking the order needs to assume the person who's calling knows what they're talking about. Unfortunately, that isn't always the case. So, what Gemini has done is develop a software system to avoid this problem in communication. In other words, we've reduced the chance of error when the order is made.

Now let's take an order that's going to a sign manufacturer in Bangkok. The U.S. sign company in

Missouri places the order, and within seconds the company in Bangkok has the order. Within seconds, milliseconds. So now they've got to produce a sign that's very bulky. Letters and signage are very, very bulky. So how are you going to get that sign from overseas to the sign company in the United States? Well, you can't ship it directly to the sign company for a very simple reason. The sign company in Missouri isn't set up to handle foreign shipments directly. They're not tuned into that. They don't have the staff. They don't know how to handle international shipments. So, the Thai company sends it via air freight to a U.S. import broker. Understand that 40% of the cost of that sign cost is in shipping. In this case, assume let's assume the Thai manufacturer sends their stainless-steel letters to an import broker in Los Angeles.

Now the sign company in Missouri finally receives the sign from the import broker in Los Angeles but low and behold there's a misspelling. The word "Moon" on the sign has only one "o", not the correct two. Now what do they do? Well, the sign company in Missouri emails the manufacturer in Bangkok and they've got to re-do the sign. Then they must ship a replacement sign, via the import broker in Los Angeles. Again, it goes aboard an air freighter, adding another 40% to the cost of the sign.

So, think about that. What Gemini did was think about how we can best serve our customers, the sign companies. So, we went down to Decora, Iowa, and started a plant to make these letters, but that did not work out. So, we went right across the border from McAllen, Texas to Reynosa, Mexico. We found a beautiful plant down there, it was about 30,000 square feet, and in it we started making these letters. There we found out right off the bat that if we make a mistake, we can fix it and the next day it's across the border and on its way to the customer. One of our drivers takes it to UPS, or FedEx, and the customer has the replacement 24 hours later, not 3 weeks later.

So, if you make a manufacturing mistake in Thailand or China that's the last order you're going to get, because the U.S. sign company says, "oh no, I'm not going to get burned twice." And that's why the supposed low-cost overseas manufacturers will never be able to compete in an industry where quality and service are important.



**VM** So, in that sense signage is, in many ways, still very local. By local I mean not of individual cities and states, but at least by region.

**JW** Yes.

**VM** You know, it really cannot be easily thought of as a global industry.

**JW** No, it cannot.

**VM** Interesting.

**JW** It must be because you find a totally different kind of signage, for example, if you go to Paris, than found in the U.S. You might find old-fashioned, fabricated letters out of acrylic, with a lot of that fabricated in Eastern Europe with its cheaper labor.

**VM** I see.

**JW** But you can't ship it, because, if you...you can't ship it country to country, because you must have a central clearing house, which is just another delay in the chain. You can't ship to the sign company. I guess you can if he's big enough, but most of them aren't, most of them aren't internationalist, you know, like Patterson up there. He can do anything he wants but he's still got to have delivery. He still, still must deliver. As a matter of fact, he's one of the easier people to deal with. He knows what delivering quality is all about. You know, Jim Patterson up in Canada.

**CA** So, it sounds like a key to Gemini's success has been offering high-quality products and service. You can respond quickly to correct problems. You can respond to customers' needs very quickly and that gives you an advantage.

**JW** Yes. And it's not just Gemini. That is how Daktronics can compete internationally. They made all the scoreboards and timing displays for the Olympics in Tokyo. Well, I'll tell you, if you want to know where the next Olympics are going to be, you look at where Daktronics is buying houses. And they buy houses to the staff to support their signage. At a Super Bowl, they have close to 30 people in their scoreboard. And they are prepared for every emergency they could possibly have.

And the same goes for the Olympics and major events around the world. Many times, they have their people inside their signs, if they're big enough, like in Las Vegas, to maintain them and make sure everything works

correctly. So that's service. They ship their service and most companies can't do that. And of course, they charge for it. So, I don't think foreign competition is in the cards for them.

**CA** One last question a bit more related to urban planning. Some urban planners are concerned about the aesthetics of signs. They are concerned with how signs can have an impact on how residents and visitors feel about a place, whether a place is where people are comfortable living and raising a family, or where they enjoy visiting and shopping. You talked about cheap foam signs that were falling apart and looked horrible after just a short time. In many ways the design and quality of the signs in a community reflect the community itself. How do you understand the importance of quality signage for making communities better places where people want to live?

**JW** I'd say that high quality is absolutely essential. I don't think it's just a small part, I think it's a very, very important part. We now have in Minnesota, almost every city now has a welcome garden. And that garden may be three times the size of your desk around a monument sign that's maybe made from bricks and mortar. Tastefully done, architecturally pleasing, and it says, "Welcome to Rosemont, Minnesota". And it may say, "Home of the Twins," or it may say, anything the town is particularly proud of. We have one here, for example, that just burned down, and there was an uproar, I think it said, "Welcome to Minnesota," and somebody set fire to a 30-foot-tall fiber glass Frankenstein that was a destination for people to come and take a picture. I think we're going to see more and more of that. Also, there is good signage along the riverfronts that for years were trashed out, but just look at some of the signage you see along riverfronts now. I think quality signage is a very, very important part of any city.

**CA** Yet there can be opposition from some businesses near historic business districts where communities require that signs are designed to reflect a historic past. Some feel the historic designs are too small.

**JW** Well, I can agree that we need to be very careful about restricting sign sizes, but you know, historic districts are nice. I know that when you get to

Richmond, Minnesota you know exactly where you are by just looking up at a sign. You can walk up to this district, and the sign will tell you a little bit about what's going on. The restaurant district in Richmond is well known for its really good food.

I do think it's important to see more and more first-class signage in cities. I think they recognize what signage can do to enhance the city. You know, airports have started to pick up on that.

**CA** Okay, well I think that's all our questions. Do you have any questions for us?

**JW** No, I'm anxious to see if any of this is any value to you. It's difficult to realize what I think is of value to anyone. Well, thank you for the work you're doing with AACSR, and we wish you well.

**CA** Yes, I understand they're planning some expansion.

**JW** Well anyhow, thank you very much for the opportunity and I hope this is of some value to you. We can go from there, and, when

**VM** Wonderful, thank you so much Jim.

**CA** Thank you.

**JW** Thank you.

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# The Genesis of a University-Based Interdisciplinary Signage Research Organization

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When I first met Jim and Sharon Weinel in 2014, I had no idea that the seeds of our first conversation would eventually lead to the formation of the Academic Advisory Council for Signage Research and Education (AACSRE), a non-profit organization that provides a space for an interdisciplinary array of academics to come together in research to respond to and anticipate issues related to on-premise signage. As envisioned, this group is a think tank which has assembled a wide cross-section of academics from art history to engineering and marketing to law, among others. The members of this group represent 21 Universities across the United States. This organization was the first of its kind to put research and researchers in the forefront of this arena. This organization would not have come to fruition without the partnership of Jim and Sharon Weinel. While they gave the founding gift upon which the organization was built, Jim and Sharon have done so much more. Their gift allowed AACSRE to put research first, allowing scholars to drive inquiry with the well-developed research tools available to them thereby enhancing the overall veracity of the scholarship produced.

Our first conversation focused on frustrations experienced by industry leaders who often found themselves in litigation with localities over regulations pertaining to on-premise signage. The story was nearly always the same. A new business wanted to construct a sign on its premises to help navigate prospective customers to their establishment. Local codes would restrict signage to a level that the business owners felt interfered with their ability to engage in the open marketplace. After failing to receive any degree of satisfaction in the regulatory appeals process, the city and business owners would find themselves at odds and in litigation.

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### *Keywords /*

regulation; sign education; sign research;  
thought leadership





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Jim and Sharon Weinel with  
AACSRE founding president, Dawn  
Jourdan at the Gemini, Inc.  
headquarters in Cannon Falls, MN

In the litigation, the city would argue that its regulations were within the police powers divested to local governments. They would claim that limitations on size or illumination were justifiable in the name of “public health, safety, and welfare.” The business owner would then hire an expert to demonstrate that the sign did not cause issues with traffic safety, for example. Another expert would show, in fact, that limitations on size not only interfered with the economic viability of the business and the commercial area in which it was situated, but also created safety issues because the lettering on signs was too small and caused traffic accidents. Ultimately, some courts would decide: (1) that the research done by industry experts was questionable in value because the work had been paid for by the complainant and not subjected to double, blind peer review and (2) that the complainant had not met the burden of proof requiring evidence that the standards developed by the local government were arbitrary and capricious. Mr. and Mrs. Weinel understood that to win these court battles, the scholarship commissioned must be bullet proof. They began asking academics how this could happen, and the result was the formation of AACSRE.

AACSRE has two signature programs. The organization designed and developed its own peer reviewed journal. Working with the University of Oklahoma Libraries, my colleagues and I co-developed the Interdisciplinary Journal of Signage and Wayfinding. This journal is unique because of its commitment to being the home for interdisciplinary scholarship related to signage. Published twice a year since 2016, the journal solicits articles from scholars in all fields that describe state-of-the-art studies related to signage. The articles are submitted to editorial teams which are competitively selected to steward the journal. Current editors include Dr. Chris Auffrey and Dr. Vikas Mehta at the University of Cincinnati’s School of Planning at the College of DAAP. These articles are reviewed as a part of a double-blind, peer-review process. This process, used widely in academic circles, is meant to bolster the credibility and the veracity of the

work that is ultimately published in the journal. To date, 11 issues of the journal have been published by more than 66 authors.

AACRSE's second signature program, the Emerging Fellows Program, is my personal favorite. My colleagues and I knew from the start of this effort that, to be sustainable, we must work together to grow the number of scholars committed to doing research about signage. Our goal for this program was to identify graduate students and pre-tenure scholars who were engaged in sign-related scholarship across the disciplines. This group is chaired by Dr. Steven Kopp, professor of Marketing at the University of Arkansas' Sam M. Walton College of Business. Annually, a call for proposals is widely distributed by this committee. The proposals are reviewed, and grants are awarded to successful applicants. These applicants utilize the funds available for a wide variety of activities, including data collection, survey design, costs associated with the acquisition of data and images, and payment for research subject participation, among other valid research uses.

Beyond funding, the Emerging Fellows Program recipients receive mentorship from members of the AACRSE Board, as well as the opportunity to present their work at the organization's annual meeting. After mentoring my own Emerging Fellows, I know that the value is reciprocal. I am positioned to introduce the fellow to a wide network of colleagues with similar interests. The fellow, in turn, can help grow my own network and understanding of a new attribute in scholarship. In developing this signature program, the Weinel's and I made a commitment to share the wealth of our experience and knowledge with future generations of AACRSE thought leaders. So far, awards have been made to eight young scholars as a part of this program.

AACRSE continues to evolve as membership grows and research questions broaden. As an organization, we believe that the organization provides the structure for on-premise signage research to happen. We do not dictate the topics of interest. Rather, we allow our members and those who submit their work to our signature programs to show us where evolution in research is possible and necessary. In some cases, new lines of

scholarship emerge because of changing legal structures or new ideas about the development of urban spaces. Technological advancements in signs, as well as the tools we use to study them, have, and will continue to drive the need for new research. For example, digital signs and smart phones are examples of two communication devices that continue to make us grapple with the role of signs in the smart city. In the future, we will continue to formulate new research that helps us better understand the power of signs to help us navigate our communities and find our ways to the places we need to travel. AACRSE will continue to look for collaborators who will contribute to and lead in this generation of new knowledge.

AACRSE was designed to provide a space and a vehicle for thought leaders in sign education and research to come together and envision ways to enliven the conversation about this very specific form of communication. It has provided that and so much more. The organization is the manifestation of the type of interdisciplinary research that all academically affiliated organizations seek to cultivate among interested scholars. Beyond professional relationships, the Weinel foundational gift seeded long-lasting and respectful relationships that will continue to bloom long into the future. For this, we are eternally grateful and committed to doing the work.

Seiz-Noakes Sign Co.

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Seiz-Noakes Sign Company, Hot Springs, Arkansas, circa 1910. Source: American Sign Museum.



# Academic Research on Signage: Research Directions to Add Value for Stakeholders

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### INTRODUCTION

The Academic Advisory Council for Signage Research and Education (AASCRES), whose existence was made possible by a generous donation from Jim and Sharon Weinel, has facilitated an organized, nonprofit, and nonpartisan academic group focused on developing and understanding issues related to signage. While on first blush, the study of signage may seem to be a simple prospect, applying to a narrow industry, the study of signage is complex, spanning numerous disciplines and involving multiple stakeholders. Technological advances, community planning, and environmental concerns impose further complexities in the study of signage that need to be taken into account. Further, signage is a regulated industry, and academic research is well suited to providing legislators and regulators with objective information.

### STAKEHOLDERS

According to the International Sign Association, as of 2022, the sign and graphics industry in the United States directly employs 200,000 people and has an overall economic impact of \$37.5 billion (International Sign Association 2022). As such, sign companies and direct employees are key stakeholders affected by the health of the signage industry. In addition, suppliers of sign companies have a major stake in the industry as their sales are impacted by overall industry sales.

End users of signage also have an important stake in the sign industry. Indeed, research shows, that most companies would lose considerable sales if they did not have an on-premise sign. Indeed, Taylor, Sarkees and Bang (2012) found that 85% of sampled on-premise sign users reported

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#### *Keywords /*

signage research; stakeholder engagement

that they would lose sales if they did not have a sign, and that the average projected loss of sales for these companies was 35%. The study found that some type of companies (e.g. retailers, tourism related businesses) projected a stronger effect than others, but that the vast majority of businesses believe that they have a strong need for an on-premise sign—meaning that millions of businesses are affected.

Other stakeholders of the sign industry include local communities and city planners, regulators, and customers of businesses. Communities and planners are affected in that planning codes consider cityscapes and environmental impact. Consumers are affected because signage plays a key role in wayfinding along with communicating information about the business (Taylor, Claus and Claus 2005).

## **ACADEMIC FIELDS AND SIGNAGE RESEARCH**

As signage affects multiple stakeholders, it needs to be studied from multiple perspectives. Some major functional areas that are in need of continued research are now reviewed.

### ***Traffic Safety Engineering***

While the balance of a substantial volume of historical research suggests that properly placed on-premise signs and billboards do not cause traffic accidents (Signage Sourcebook 2003), technological advances lead to a need for continued study of proper location and visibility of signs along with any potential for distraction on the part of a new technology. The Interdisciplinary Journal of Signage and Wayfinding has already made considerable contributions in this area. For example, Bullough (2017) provided a review and annotated bibliography of research on visibility, conspicuity and legibility of signage. Aprdian and Alam (2017) conducted a specific study of midblock pedestrian crossings, finding that speed and road width are among the factors that predict a driver's likelihood of yielding to a pedestrian. The authors also suggest that including signage on both sides of the roadway and/or overhead signage also can have an impact on traffic safety. Additional studies with safety implications published in *IJSW*

have focused on topics such as recommended mounting heights of signs (Garvey and Klena 2019); lighting issues (Bullough 2019).

### ***Transportation and Wayfinding***

In addition to traffic safety, a related area of research is helping motorists and/or consumers find locations. Issues involving conspicuity and readability as well as legibility come into play here. For signs to be easily comprehended, prior research shows that it should stand out within its environment, in addition to being easy to read. *IJSW* has already seen multiple contributions in this area, with articles focused on topics such as signs and wayfinding on public transportation systems (Ferri, Popp and Wulfhurst 2021) and in airports (Symonds 2017). In addition, Jourdan and Berger (2016) published a review of a book on improving community wayfinding in general. Going forward there will clearly be a continued need for research on helping consumers to find their way to locations and businesses.

### ***Urban and Community Planning***

Planners around the country are concerned about the appearance of communities, whether urban or rural. For planners to make good decisions, it is important to be well versed in research on signage, its functions, including research on public opinion on aesthetic and environmental issues, functions of signs, and their economic impact. *IJSW* has published several articles that are relevant to planners, including Greub's (2019) examination of signage and its' relationship to circulations spaces and passages, Hildebrandt and Auffrey's (2020) analysis of road signage and contextual communication on America's legacy highways, and Nafisur Rahman and Mehta's (2020) analysis of signage form and character as a window to neighborhood visual identity. Another recent contribution by Mehta and Nafisur Rahman (2021) explored visualizing and communicating neighborhood identities via signage. Rakestraw, Crawford, and Lee (2021) looked at similar issues, focusing on how municipalities need regulations that create visually stimulating public places. The authors specifically surveyed consumers using visual models in order to compare the percep-

tion of planning/design professionals to non-designed of signscapes, their aesthetics, communications properties, and perceptions of sign codes.

### **Marketing**

It has been well documented that signage plays a significant role in marketing communications, but relatively limited study of the marketing functions of signs and factors related to effective marketing communication via signage has been conducted (Taylor, Claus and Claus 2005). *IJSW* authors have begun to provide more studies of the marketing aspects of signage. Kellaris and Machleit (2016), for example, published a full conceptual model of the marketing communications of signage. Other areas investigated include studies of where visual attention is focused on a sign using eye tracking (Simpson 2021), location issues in high traffic vs. low traffic areas (Hong and Issac 2021), image processing and the impact of missing information in signage (Sundar, Wu and Karda's (2019) and on-premise signs and their placement in enclosed shopping malls (Berger 2017). A recent study by Knuth, Behue and Huddleston also examined factors related to the effectiveness of retail display signs (Knuth, bee, and Huddleston 2020).

With the growing body of literature on signage as a marketing communications device, there is little doubt that future researchers will delve further into how to make signage effective for marketers. Moreover, a focus on integration with other marketing mix elements and the interaction between regulation and marketing impact is needed.

### **Law and Regulation**

Because federal, state, and local statutes as well as court decisions all have an impact on signage regulation, research on legal issues pertaining to signage is an area ripe for research. In its relatively short history, *IJSW* has published some key articles that help better understand legal issues. As local codes play a central role in signage regulation, Jourdan, Strauss and Hunter's (2017) articulation of best practices in the sign code development and Weinstein's (2017) review of legal considerations in sign code development are key contributions. As court decisions and codes are subject to change, it is likely that we will see more academic research designed to inform policy making going forward.

### **Art and History**

As signage is clearly a highly visible part of the U.S. landscape (as well as that of other countries), it is no surprise that it has been studied by artists and historians. Different sign types as well as the impact of signs on municipalities is of interest from a historical perspective. In addition, it is no surprise that art experts are interested in the aesthetic and artistic elements





Sign fabrication process, circa 1930s. Source: American Sign Museum.





of signage. One article in *IJSW* looking at signage from a historical perspective was Sandra and Trinco (2018). The authors examined Brooklyn retail signage's history, focusing on the transitions from "old school" signs which we often hand painted and text rich that the authors argue is welcoming to a diverse population to what the authors term gentrifying signage that is more laconic and ambiguous. Babcock's (2021) article on road signs and public art provides an excellent example of how signage can be viewed from an artist's perspective. There is little doubt that research by historian and artists can enrich the study of signage.

### ***Visual issues***

While there is some overlap with traffic safety, wayfinding and marketing due to the need for signage to be noticed in order to be seen and be effective, contributions of visual scientists are highly important. Signs are usually characterized by limited space and issues such as size of the sign, legibility, letter heights, background, contrast, font, and lighting, among others (U.S. Small Business Administration 2003) all come into play in ways that involve vision and visual processing of information. This is another area in which authors have already made contributions in *IJSW* articles. Examples include Pena, Ragan and Harrison's (2020) study of the memorability of enhanced informational graphics and Li and Huang's (2020) study of visual access formed by architecture and its influence on spatial exploration in museums. Tulio-Pow, Yu, and Strickfaden (2021) add a different dimension to visual study by examining shopping experiences of visually impaired consumers. Such studies focusing on visual aspects of signage have the potential to make key contributions to the literature.

### ***Economic Impact and the Value of Signage***

Another area that is in need of more research is the economic impact of signage. Prior work has shown that signage has a profound impact on economies (e.g., Auffrey, Hildebrandt and Rexhausen 2011; Taylor, Sarkees and Bang 2012). In addition, work on the valuation of signage in court cases from the perspectives of appraisers, marketers, and business is need as well as the value of signage is frequently at issue in court cases.

## **CONCLUSION**

The legacy of Jim and Sharon Weinel's gift to create AASCRE is apparent. In addition to the organization of an academic non-profit group focused on signage research and education, the formation of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Signage and Wayfinding* has created a significant outlet of the publication and dissemination of research on signage. Led by the efforts of founding editor Dawn Jourdan and current editors Vikas Mehta and Chris Auffrey, *IJSW* has established itself as the premier outlet devoted to signage research. As outlined above, the study of signage is relevant to many fields, including, but not limited to, those from engineering, transportation, planning, architecture, business and marketing, advertising and communications, visual sciences, art, history, economics, and appraisal and valuation. *IJSW* will continue to provide an

important outlet for this research to inform industry, academia, and policy makes about knowledge pertaining to signage.

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# A Fellowship Emerges: The Weinels' Promise for Signage Research and Education

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### INTRODUCTION

One of the most important endeavors for AACSB is the Emerging Fellows program. The program supports and encourages researchers who have demonstrated promise and/or success in conducting research related to issues of on-premise signs.

In 2016, the new AACSB board created the first committee to initiate a “distinguished fellows” program, led by Dawn Jourdan. To point attention to the “promise” of scholarship, the program was entitled “Emerging Fellows,” with eligibility for pre-tenure faculty, post-doctoral, and graduate student applicants. The committee developed the structure for the program and outlined the first Call for Proposals. The “AACSB Emerging Fellows Class of 2017” was introduced in March of that year.

The implementation of “fellowships” indicated the specific purpose of introducing a new generation of researchers and educators to advance signage issues in their own fields. However, the Emerging Fellows program is unique in that eligible applicants may come from any academic discipline that can bring a scholarly perspective to on-premise signage, visual communications, or wayfinding. The research outcomes can reach across scholarship of signage-related technologies, legal issues, art, engineering, and business. Each Emerging Fellow holds the title for two years and can receive up to \$10,000 per year. Under the current guidelines, the Fellowships are portable, in that they are awarded to an individual, rather than to an institution. This feature has already allowed fourth- or fifth-year PhD students to arrive at their new employers with research funding in-hand. The funding directly supports their research and its dissemination. Emerging Fellows have used the funds for data collection, creative interventions, surveys, and

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#### *Keywords /*

emerging scholars; signage research

expenses for conference presentations and other outlays necessary for any new science or concepts.

Research is a long-term and high-risk process, but a retrospective of only five years produces an impressive list of scholarly works that have already been derived directly from Emerging Fellows funding:

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**McClellan, Kelsey Dalton. "Return on Investment: Business Model Project for Heart & Bone Signs." PhD dissertation, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2017.**

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**Sundar, Aparna, Flavia Gonsales, and Gracie Schafer. "Synchronicity in signage promotes a sense of belonging." *Interdisciplinary Journal of Signage and Wayfinding* 2, no. 2 (2018): 30-40.**

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**Sundar, Aparna, Ruomeng Wu, and Frank R. Kardes. "Faded Fonts: How Difficulty in Image Processing Promotes Sensitivity to Missing Information." *Interdisciplinary Journal of Signage and Wayfinding* 3, no. 1 (2019): 16-27.**

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**Henderson, Conor M., Marc Mazodier, and Aparna Sundar. "The color of support: The effect of sponsor–team visual congruence on sponsorship performance." *Journal of Marketing* 83, no. 3 (2019): 50-71.**

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***Special issue:* Sundar, Aparna, and Hélène Deval. "Introduction." *Interdisciplinary Journal of Signage and Wayfinding* 4, no. 2 (2020): 1-6.**

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**Peña, Alyssa, Eric Ragan, and Lane Harrison. "Memorability of Enhanced Informational Graphics." *Interdisciplinary Journal of Signage and Wayfinding* 4, no. 1 (2020).**

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**Rahman, Muhammad, and Vikas Mehta. "Signage Form and Character: A window to neighborhood visual identity" *Interdisciplinary Journal of Signage and Wayfinding* 4, no. 1 (2020).**

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**Hong, Jennifer, and Mathew Isaac. "Location, Location, Location." *Interdisciplinary Journal of Signage and Wayfinding* 5, no. 1 (2021): 26-40.**

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**Wu, Ruomeng, Xiaoqi Han, and Frank R. Kardes. "Special fonts: The Competing roles of difficulty and uniqueness in consumer inference." *Psychology & Marketing* 38, no. 1 (2021): 86-100.**

In an academic context, these publications represent a direct and enduring contribution to our understanding of the roles of signage in society. Indirectly, and beyond this singular contribution to academic literatures, this early encouragement can influence an individual researcher's professional development and subsequently their entire career. First, the title of "Emerging Fellow" alone indicates a standing of prestige and recognizes an area of expertise. Second, AACSR provides a network for collaboration for those who may be new to the study of on-premise signage issues. Emerging Fellowships are awarded to small cohorts, one year apart, such that researchers in one academic discipline may find that they share interests with researchers in other disciplines. For example, a Fellow specializing





#### AACSRE Emerging Fellows

Top row: (L-R) Jennifer Hong, Aparna Sundar, Eric Ragan, Riley Krotz;  
Bottom row: (L-R) Muhammad Rahman, Rita To, Ruomeng Wu, Adekunle Adebisi.

in urban planning may find concepts from a consumer behavior researcher that help explain the impacts of planned environments on shopping behaviors. This cross-pollination of ideas is a key benefit of the program. Of course, the ongoing research is presented to AACSRE meetings, departmental seminars, and professional conferences. Some research may have potential for commercial application, and AACSRE can facilitate relationships with non-academic audiences.

The productive scholarship from our Emerging Fellows enriches the AACSRE organization as well. University communications and external relations offices share news about the Fellowships and subsequent publications, raising awareness of AACSRE activities. Also, the simple fact that scholarship for new and promising topics keeps the subject matter fresh for AACSRE members. This helps AACSRE participate in the true cutting edge of on-premise signage research. From an administrative standpoint, awarding the Fellowships requires AACSRE to be flexible and work with a wide variety of university institutional structures to

maximize the funds that get into the hands of the researcher. The Emerging Fellows program is more than just something that AACSRE provides; AACSRE benefits in many ways from the program.

It is easy to anticipate some near-future growth for Emerging Fellowships to continue to support a range of activities that advance research and education for signage issues. The potential to expand support for stipends (to provide researchers the time as well as the materials), for international contributors, or for any other of a range of sponsorships and financial assistance to validate the research of more senior researchers.

AACSRE's primary mission is to engage independent thought leadership in an interdisciplinary space to enhance research and education regarding signage. The Emerging Fellows program prompts recipients to "do something exceptional." The Fellowships provide promising researchers with resources, decision making support, and professional networks so they can pursue goals that might

not otherwise be attainable. The crossdisciplinary nature of the research that is supported by these fellowships is exciting and is manifestly consistent with AACRE's mission to advance the science and technology of on-premise signage. Further, the Fellowships cultivate leadership in research and education that can have an influence on individual disciplines.

The Emerging Fellows program has already had an impact on conceptualizations of signage and has expanded definitions and understanding of our research domains. The program has almost immediately influenced teaching and training efforts. We express our gratitude to Jim and Sharon Weinel for their vision and to former AACRE President Dawn Jourdan and former AACRE Executive Director Patty Herbin for their efforts to foster this remarkable program.

# The American Sign Museum: A Place for the Public and Signage Researchers to Understand the Past, Present and Future of Signage in the U.S.

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## INTRODUCTION

The American Sign Museum (ASM) is dedicated to restoring, preserving, and displaying historic signs, and educating a broad public about the contributions of the sign designers, fabricators and users to commerce, culture, and popular art (ASM, Mission, 2022). As such, the ASM serves as a unique and valuable resource for signage researchers apart from the museum's mission "to celebrate the rich history of American signage through preservation and education" of an interested public (ASM, Mission, 2022). The National Signs of the Times Museum was founded in Cincinnati by Tod Swormstedt in 1999. With additional support and growth, it was renamed and re-opened as the American Sign Museum in 2005 as a nonprofit corporation. The museum was subsequently moved and greatly expanded at its current location in 2012. Major support has been provided by the Swormstedt family and others interested in the history and role of signage in the U.S., especially Jim and Sharon Weinel (ASM, Support, 2022)

Tod Swormstedt had been on the staff at the *Signs of the Times* for twenty-six years, a publication for sign-industry news, technical information, and analysis since 1906, and served as the fourth-generation editor of the "bible of the sign industry" (Beckman and Ranieri, 2017). Tod parlayed his knowledge and contacts into a self-proclaimed "mid-life crisis project" that would eventually become the American Sign Museum. This was Tod's chance to preserve the 3-D artisanship of multi-generational sign companies, to tell their stories and bring these signs to life before they were lost forever (ASM, Story, 2022).

The museum originally resided in an arts center, but as the collection expanded and larger signs were acquired, including iconic McDonald's

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### Keywords/

American Sign Museum; vintage signs;  
preservation; education



and Holiday Inn signs, a larger space was needed to display these to their full height. Eventually an empty century-old industrial building with 28-foot ceilings able to accommodate the museum's growing display needs was secured in Cincinnati's historic Camp Washington neighborhood, a mixed industrial-residential area sandwiched between a busy urban interstate highway and an active railroad switching yard. The building had been part of the Oesterlein Machine Company-Fashion Frocks, Inc. complex and was listed on the National Register of Historic Places (ASM, Story, 2022). After additional fundraising that again included substantial support from Jim and Sharon Weinel, and extensive renovations, the location became the museum's new home, opening in June 2012.

Given the Weinels' dedication to giving back to the sign industry, it is not surprising that the ASM has received their significant support. The Weinels have been major supporters of ASM from its initiation, and subsequently provided additional support to complete the renovation of the museum's current building. As acknowledged on the ASM website, "without them, there would not be an American Sign Museum" (ASM, Support, 2022).

## WHY THE AMERICAN SIGN MUSEUM IS IMPORTANT

Information about signs can be found in journals, reports, books, public

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(L) American Sign Museum  
Entrance (L)

(R) American Sign Museum  
Big Boy Welcoming Visitors.  
Image Credit: Wayne Clause





documents and on a variety of websites but those materials are challenged to communicate what can be learned from direct observation and touch. The ASM staff are able to provide details of the design, construction, operation, and use of their signs that may be impossible to replicate through other research sources. The collection in the ASM, as in other good museums, is a tangible, physical resource allowing visitors to experience up close the actual objects that shaped our history. Seeing and touching these objects with one's own eyes and hands creates an understanding and appreciation that reading about something or simply seeing pictures of it cannot. Indeed, museum studies research has shown that museum experiences shape how visitors understand the past and shape attitudes about the future (Rennie and Johnston, 2004). This is especially important for signs and signage, given their ubiquitous and important presence in everyday life, and the critical function they serve in wayfinding, and public and commercial visual communication.

Museums also are important laboratories for

research on the objects and artifacts in their collections and have served as important partners with universities so that researchers and students have the opportunity to utilize their collection (Rennie and Johnston, 2004). This research helps explain how the world works, and answers some of the questions about the how and whys of what was and why what we have has come to be. The signs displayed in the ASM tell stories not only about the displayed signs and the people that created and viewed them, but also about the physical, political, and economic nature of places where they were displayed. As such, ASM displays provides a visual story to visitors about the evolving nature of American culture, institutions, and technology over the past 150 years. Without those stories, it would be far more difficult to understand the need for and nature of visual communication in today's world.

The progression and preservation of society depends on museums like the ASM. At the ASM, visitors leave with vibrant memories of the displays and signs observed, but also with the lessons they learned. Visitors



Downtown St Louis at Night B&W  
Source: American Sign Museum

to the ASM who experienced and can remember when the displayed signs were in common use are likely to have their memories reinforced and leave with an extended knowledge about the role and importance of those signs, as well a better understanding of the role of signage more generally in contributing to everyday life as we know it today.

It was within this context that the importance of Jim and Sharon Weinels' support of the ASM can best be understood and appreciated. Specifically, the ASM serves both the public and the sign industry by providing lessons about:

1. Evoking and speaking to local, regional, and national nostalgia with respect to the signage of products and retailers that are remembered or have been learned about from the past.
2. Local, regional, and national histories with respect to commercial communication.
3. The history of sign design (and branding) and the impact of these on product impact, as well as their impact on the creation of place for the locations where the signs are located.
4. History of the evolution of signage craft and technology, and the innovations that have driven changes in signage design, placement and use with impacts on communication effectiveness of signs.



## CONNECTION OF THE AMERICAN SIGN MUSEUM TO SIGNAGE RESEARCH

As the only museum in the U.S. dedicated to the art and craft of sign-making, the ASM seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the impacts of on-premise signs on people and places. With more than 200 signs on display and over 3,800 items cataloged, the collection ranges from the late nineteenth century to the 1970s (Skyticket, American Sign Museum, 2022). When in their original use, the signs now displayed at the ASM advertised specific businesses and brands in specific locations along specific roadways within specific communities. As such, they were subject to the tastes and preferences of business owners and any local sign regulations, if they existed. Their purpose was to market and brand a business, organization, or institution, and identify its specific location. Just as important was how the signs individually and together with other signs and visible features contributed to the creation and maintenance of a “sense of place” for a specific location and its surrounding area (Jackson 1994). Yet as part of the ASM collection these signs now have the potential to serve a different role as historical objects reflecting a socio-

cultural-physical context of the times and places in which the signs were created and displayed. To those interested in American history more generally, the historic signs provide nuanced insight to how patterns of visual communication may reflect the changing social norms and evolving development patterns and technology. For those interested in the various sub-areas of signage research, the ASM signage collection provides several opportunities. These include the opportunity to learn from the historic patterns of sign design and response to changing technology as a basis for understanding current signage design and regulation challenges. This is especially important given the rapidly changing display and cell phone technology over the past two decades, especially when considered in the context of multi-generational differences in social norms and expectations for commercial communication.

In addition to the museum’s collection of historic signs, the ASM collection also includes books, catalogs, tools, blueprints, equipment, and other items related to the history and process of sign-making. One of the most crucial elements of this part of the ASM collection is the complete



American Sign Museum  
McDonald's Sign on Main Street.  
Image Credit: Wayne Clause





# Book Review:

## Vintage Signs of America

by Jane Seltzer

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In *Vintage Signs of America*, Jane Seltzer examines the relationships among the history, cultural significance, purpose, and physical details of vintage signs across the United States from the early 1900s to the 1970s. Most of the signs shown and discussed throughout this book date back to the 1940s and 1950s since most of the signs that have been protected and restored are from this time period. Vintage signs embody an iconic, artistic, and historic flare. They serve as reminders of the types of businesses that were once popular during the early to mid-1900s—typically mom-and-pop restaurants and shops—as well as the standard cultural norms of these time periods. Unfortunately, many of the signs depicted and discussed in this book are no longer components of their innate vernacular landscape. Instead of writing chapters focused on regions or states, Seltzer chose to combine distinct collections of signs based on architectural qualities and characteristics. *Vintage Signs of America* is broken down into three sections. *Types of Signs* provides information about the various materials used, display methods, and unique features of vintage signs. Themes offers a description of sign figures, such as people, animals, and objects. *The Future of Vintage Signs (Preserving Vintage Signs)* addresses the resistance to and importance of the preservation of vintage signs, while discussing appropriate and practical approaches for their maintenance and protection. In this chapter, *The American Sign Museum*, *The Neon Museum*, and *Museum of Neon Art* are applauded for their work in this respect. Aside from these sources, few others are used, as most of the book content is original. Seltzer awards proper credit to the individuals and producers involved in the creation of the vintage signs portrayed in this book through discussion.

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#### Book Review

Seltzer, J. (2017). *Vintage Signs of America*. Gloucestershire : Amberley Publishing.

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Sunbeam Bread sign atop  
Perfection Bakery in Fort Wayne,  
Indiana. Source: Seltzer, 2017.

Seltzer began documenting and researching signs, buildings, and statues for her website called [www.roadsidearchitecture.com](http://www.roadsidearchitecture.com) in 2001. This website boasts over 2,500 pages of content and 60,000 photographs. Along this journey, Seltzer has also captured over 10,000 images of vintage signs across the United States, many of which are the primary subjects of this book. Since her continuous contributions to the *Society for Commercial Archaeology's* publications, Seltzer's passion for signs has compelled her to share her wealth of knowledge with others on this topic through *Vintage Signs of America*. This once popular but forgotten method for conveying ambient text and visual representations emerges once again as a curiosity to the eye and imagination. Seltzer's exceptional descriptions of documented signs clearly convey that vintage signs deserve to be celebrated for their important role in shaping American art, culture, the character of places, and the economy over time into their current forms and states.

In *Types of Signs*, Seltzer investigates bulb, Federal Electric, opal glass letter, mechanical, neon extension, rooftop, sputniks, star, and plastic signs. Signs, such as opal glass and neon extensions, portray architectural beauty, while others simply serve clear purposes like advertising products. A vast array of colors, representations, placement, and purposes of the signs in this chapter offer a glimpse into the past that allows readers to recall and relish childhood memories or imagine a uniquely adorned American landscape previously unknown to them. Due to the rapid spread of successful and highly demanded products spanning decades, many brands for which these signs advertised are still common household names. Examples include Kodak, Goodyear, Sunbeam, and General Electric. The many names of individuals and companies identified in the once thriving sign making industry are part of the story of how vintage signs were originally used and how creativity evolved out of a need to communicate to people interacting in and with public space. Although many vintage signs have captured the

attention of those in the neighborhood or passing by, Seltzer discusses that many of the signs have entered into a state of disrepair due to damage from weather events or lack of money to replace bulbs or other parts. Some towns and cities have realized the contribution of these historic remnants to their community's character and sense of place and have invested in restoring and maintaining decades old signs. The combination of words with various fonts and fine detailing assist in the creation of the identity of the towns and cities in which signs were once found. These signs evoke feelings of familiarity among a wide range of readers, such as sign enthusiasts and students. Seltzer captures the reader's attention through the emotionally, intellectually, and visually compelling content of the book.

In the second category, *Themes*, Seltzer analyzes different common vintage sign figures found across the United States. The subcategories composed of people, animals, and things can be further broken down to include various types of chefs, cowboys, Indians, men at work, women, birds, fish, dogs, cats, other mammals, donuts, fast food chains, bowling, roller skating, cars, and plumbing. Chefs, cowboys, and men at work are cartoonish, emotionally expressive, and colorful. The cowboys and Indians appear separately and are primarily found in western states. A primary distinction among the chefs, cowboys, and Indians is that the majority of the chefs appear rather short while the cowboys and Indians are taller with long legs and torsos. Seltzer describes the figures in a way that adds context through hints that these sign characters were of a style similar to what was observed in popular western films. Women are depicted in line with social norms of the times in which the signs were created and displayed. The women are slim, feminine, and are visualized taking on typical female roles, such as washing laundry and grocery shopping. Working men have a wider range of occupations that conform to traditional male roles. Such jobs include chopping wood, driving construction vehicles, chopping meat, and welding. Animals are bright, colorful, and animated. The purposes of the signs depicting women, men, and animals are to advertise a product or service housed inside the buildings to which the signs belong or to playfully incorporate

regional or local cultures. The signs in general range from realistic and detailed paintings to neon tube light that give the shape of a figure of a football kicker, for example. This unique assortment of vintage signs comes to life in Seltzer's photographs, and takes the reader on a sight-seeing road trip across the United States.

While *Vintage Signs of America* covers a wide range of signs, portraying a variety of structures that uphold these signs and settings would offer an opportunity to add greater substance to the text. Diversifying the demographic backgrounds of people and settings would enhance the complexity of the connections examined in the themes section. Aside from the Native American figures, almost all of the people represented by the signs are Caucasian. One side of the rich history from the 1910s to the 1970s is presented while many others are left unmentioned. Seltzer does not note that these signs point to human rights issues that were occurring during the years that these signs were made and used. While most of the vintage signs that remain live in museums, some areas of the deep south and southwest may have had some signs left that portrayed the influence of African American and Hispanic cultures on the United States in the 1910s to the 1970s. Much of the Native American sign art appears out of the context of Native American cultures, and instead is portrayed in a way that suggests that this minority group was not involved in the creation of these signs. These observations may lead readers to form specific conclusions about the book.

The final section, *The Future of Vintage Signs (Preserving Vintage Signs)*, acknowledges that the loss of interest in vintage signs was due to the significant amount of care and maintenance required for their upkeep. Many sign owners simply were unable to afford the cost of repairing signs after weather events and protecting signs from rust. Seltzer notes that it is not uncommon for neon sign restoration to cost \$10,000 or more. Unfortunately, signs of this type are generally not considered national landmarks and are, therefore, only offered protection by museums interested in collecting such relics. Seltzer relies upon her expertise to state that while historic designations should be awarded, at the local level it is usually not practical as building owners must commit to main-

taining top condition of the signs. When original building owners relocate, letters are rarely able to be rearranged to reflect the name of the new business. New owners may have their own opinions and limitations concerning care for inherited signs, which often leads to their deterioration and ultimate removal from the built environment. Seltzer shifts her focus to proactive approaches that have been, and continue to be, taken today to save and restore vintage signs. Seltzer states that large sums of funding have been awarded for repair and restoration due to increasing recognition of vintage signs as historic landmarks. Over time, the sign industry has shifted from creating signs with specific qualities and characteristics, to collecting and restoring these now vintage signs. Cities such as Saginaw, Michigan, and Rancho Cucamonga, California have created sign parks or have used vintage signs from closed businesses as a new aesthetic for their modern communities. Seltzer concludes the book by providing readers with a summary of *The American Sign Museum* (Cincinnati, Ohio), *Museum of Neon Art* (Glendale, California), *The Neon Museum* (Las Vegas, Nevada), and offers tools to readers who are interested in preserving vintage signs. Seltzer recommends sharing an appreciation for signs to local business owners, finding friends with similar interests in preserving vintage signs, fundraising, and becoming involved in determining the fate of a sign that may be removed due to a business closure.

*Vintage Signs of America* not only provides the reader with information pertaining to the history of signs, but also offers an opportunity to become involved in the preservation of vintage signs. Seltzer's ability to explore sign themes and beauty in a manner that relates to the past, present, and future, through her own images and expertise makes *Vintage Signs of America* a significant contribution to the research of signage and is a unique publication that is widely interpretable by a range of audiences.