Signs Of The Times

By David L. Perkins, AIA

Stand on a busy street corner in downtown Lafayette and scan all four directions. You have just seen about 100 of the ugliest, most uninteresting, offensive objects in the whole city.

The problem I am talking about is signs. Signs in shop windows, buildings, billboards, traffic signs, and on and on ad infinitum. That only a few highways, shopping centers and airports are a real environmental design problem, blighting our landscape when they could be improving it.

The problem with most written displays is that they were just afternoons with no consideration of the total effect on the surroundings. Thus a bank designed in a dignified, Renaissance style may sport a jazzy, modern electric sign, complete with rotating time and weather readings. Or an albaster building gets while aluminum lettering on its wall - completely invisible from the other side of the street.

Or we find a conglomeration of traffic signs crowded together like a scene from a pop art nightmare - This Way to Interstate 19, Tow - Away Zone. Left Turn on Arrow Only, Speed Limit 25 MPH, No Parking, No Littering, No Loitering.

Some Say Too Much

The second common error with signs is that they often defeat their own purpose; in trying to say too much, they don't get any message across at all.

The outriders of highways is that the skyline is cluttered with signs so numerous or so wordy that half of them can't even be read by a person traveling 60 miles per hour. Thus money has been wasted and the public has lost another battle in the war against ugliness.

It is amazing that businessmen waste so much money on this investment which often has so little effect. Even if a business spends as little as a few hundred dollars and often several thousand just to get the public's attention with a sign. Multiply this by the number of signs you saw on that busy street corner here in Lafayette and you begin to see the extent of the cost involved.

Businessmen could solve the problem of this junk pollution and increase returns on their own investment if they would use a little planning. The ideal situation would be to include signs and displays as part of the original design to be handled by the architect.

Graphic Design Effective

Often a part of the building itself can be used as a sign. Or the architect may choose a particular building shape or door location with a view to including an effective, integrated sign. Isn't this more sensible than ignoring a sign until the last minute?

Major corporations think it is, and such businesses as IBM, Philip Morris, General Motors and Chase Manhattan Bank have spent large sums on graphic designers' fees. They realize how important architectural graphics can be in selling their products.

Graphic designers have come up with several criteria to get maximum impact, with the least expense and in the best taste:

1. Say it in as few words as possible. No company has made better use of this maxim than International Business Machines. IBM. Those three letters constitute one of the most effective signs to be seen any where. Without listing company name or products or prices, those three letters convey their message with simplicity and force.

2. Be sure the sign can be easily read and understood. Psychedelic lettering can be fascinating, but the average person doesn't like to spend five minutes deciphering one word.

A textbook example of readability can be found in modern airports. Their use of white letters on black backgrounds and vice versa, are the ultimate in visual contrast, and contrast means legibility.

3. A sign should ideally be an element of architecture. Place it intelligently in relation to the building so one can truly say "it belongs."

4. A sign should be above all in good taste. This means it won't add to the visual rubbish of the landscape, but will have at least a little dignity and appear pleasing to the viewer. A well - mannered, appropriate sign will actually attract more attention than its gaudy neighbors, simply because it is unusually simple.

The public has really been too good to the sign - makers. For too long we have allowed businesses to clutter our surroundings with the most outrageous manner. We need to demand more consideration to aesthetics if we ever intend to improve the quality of the environment. If a sign isn't art of the solution, it is part of the pollution.

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