

Signage

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Introduction

Historic signs can contribute to a neighbourhood's sense of place by telling the story of the community and offering landmarks. Today, historic signs stand out among the uniform franchise signs and plastic "box" signs for their unique details, materials, and references to particular people, shops, or events.

However, there are several challenges to conserving historic signs, most notably the fact that buildings change uses and businesses change in ownership. This results in signage changes to reflect the new owner's business practices or to project a new image. Trends in architecture and technology can also lead to sign changes, such as the Art Deco lettering popular in the 1920s and 1930s, and the use of neon in the 1940s.

The cultural significance of signs combined with their tendency to change makes the conservation of historic signs a challenge. This Practical Guide, with direction taken largely from the US National Preservation Services, [Preservation Brief #25: The Preservation of Historic Signs](#) will discuss historic sign

practices, and give examples of how historic signs have been preserved even when a business has changed hands or a building has been converted to a new use. The guide will also provide advice on maintaining historic signs and installing new ones that are compatible with heritage structures.

Historic Sign Types

19th-Century Signs

Prior to the 1800s, hanging commercial signs were the most commonly used sign type, and included symbolic signs mounted on poles, suspended from buildings, or painted on hanging wooden boards.

However, suspended signs posed safety hazards, and creaked when they swayed in the wind. Flat signs, with lettering mounted flush against a building gradually replaced hanging signs, and by the beginning of the 1800s a number of sign variations were beginning to be observed. Some of those most commonly found include:

Fascia Signs

Fascia signs were the most common 19th-century sign type and were named for their placement on the fascia or horizontal band between a storefront and second floor. Fascia is often called the “signboard” due to its perfect dimensions to mount or paint on a sign. However, due to the narrowness of fascia, signmakers had limited space to work with and usually produced signs that included only the name of the business and a street number.



Image: Example of a fascia sign, placed on the horizontal band between the storefront and second floor (Lindsay Benjamin, 2014).

Wall Signs

Wall signs, common in the 1800s, are located flat against or painted onto the surface of a building, generally on the upper façade. Owners would advertise their name and product on available plain wall surfaces. The most common type of sign was a large board or individual letters running horizontally across the face of a building between windows of the upper floors. Many buildings could have two or three such signs and most would stretch the full width of the property.



Image: Wall sign located on the upper storey of a former factory (Lindsay Benjamin, 2014)

Hanging or Projecting Signs

Hanging or projecting signs, both lettered and symbolic, were still used in the 1800s, but in a more limited capacity than in previous eras. Projecting signs are placed at right angles to a building face and either fixed to the wall or hung from a bracket to increase visibility.

Goldleaf or Gilded Signs

Goldleaf or gilding produced elegant, durable signs and was a very popular sign material in the 1800s and early 1900s. These signs were commonly painted or etched on glass windows, doors and transoms.

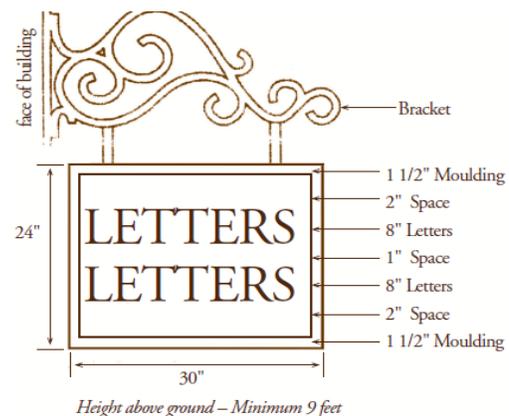


Image: Sample dimensions of a hanging sign (Saint John Heritage, 2010)

Porcelain Enamel Signs

These types of signs were very popular in the last half of the 1800s and into the mid-1900s. They are made of glass bonded onto metal (generally steel) at high temperatures to produce high gloss that maintains colour for decades.

Sidewalk Signs

Sidewalk signs or "sandwich boards" provided an additional opportunity to catch the eye of a passerby who might not notice signs overhead. Many tenants in the 1800s looking for additional advertising space were creative with placement. They would use entrance steps to mount signs on handrails, risers, skirts, and balusters to give businesses on upper levels a chance to attract notice as well.

Awnings

In addition to sheltering shoppers and merchandise, and reducing glare and temperatures, awnings on commercial buildings offer valuable advertising space. Photographs from the mid-1800s show a wide range of lettering and logos on the sloped coverings and side flaps of awnings, including business names, types of products, and street numbers. The most common placement of a shop proprietor's business name or service was on the fringe or skirt of the awning, as well as the panel at the side. The front fringe provided a flat surface visible whether the awning was closed or extended.



Image: Signs and awnings are a critical component of a streetscape (Saint John Heritage, 2010)

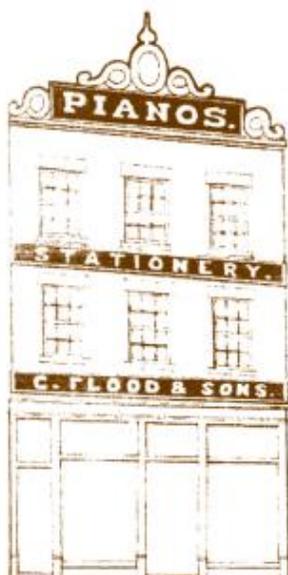


Image: Illustration of a rooftop sign (Saint John Heritage, 2010)

Rooftop Signs

In the mid-to-late-1800s rooftop signs became more common and ornate and were typically found on hotels, theaters, banks and other large buildings. Prior to this they were much simpler, often just larger versions of fascia signs located on a building's first storey.

Rooftop signs were not used alone but were part of larger signage efforts, partnered with window and awning signs that attracted pedestrians, while upper level signs reached viewers at greater distances.

As the 19th-century progressed, signs increased in size and scale. By the last half of the 1800s it was not uncommon to find wall signs several

storeys high. It was around this time that cities were experiencing rapid population growth and the addition of larger buildings. Elevated trains and electric streetcars became more common and increased the pace of street activity. It became well known that the faster people travel the larger a sign needs to be for them to see it clearly.

20th-Century Signs

In the 1900s electricity became widespread and this allowed signs to incorporate light and, later, movement and also provided the opportunity to light streets at night. Signs were initially lit by shining light onto them, but the real advantage of electrified signs occurred when light bulbs were used to form images and words. Light bulbs flashing on and off quickly caught the attention of those passing by and bulbs blinking in sequence could simulate movement. It should be noted, however, that this form of lighting is not appropriate for most historic buildings.

It was during this era that architects began integrating signs and buildings into a unified design. For example, Art Deco buildings would be adorned with signs that reflected the structure's architectural style and detailing.

Neon

Neon was a new material added to the art of sign making in the 1900s. Neon is a gas that glows when an electric charge passes through it. It is encased in glass tubes shaped into letters and symbols and offers signmakers an unlimited number of options for shapes, images and colours.

Neon first appeared in signs in the 1920s, had a heyday in the 1940s and then became popular again in the 1970s. Renewed interest in neon signs during this time sparked concern for their preservation that continues today.



Image: Example of a large rooftop neon sign.
(Lindsay Benjamin, 2014)



Image: Neon sign advertising a restaurant.
(Lindsay Benjamin, 2014)

Plastic

Following World War II, signs were transformed by the wide availability of plastic. Due to the several advantages it had over traditional signs constructed of wood and metal it quickly became the dominant sign material. Plastic can take almost any shape and colour and because it is translucent it can be lit from behind and appear to glow. It is also very durable, inexpensive and can be mass produced.

General Recommendations

Signs are regulated by local sign by-laws that must be adhered to while also considering to the following recommendations.

Location

Signs are most effectively located on the flat, blank parts of a façade, such as show windows, awning flaps, masonry surfaces, and the frieze. When possible, ensure that signs do not obscure the building's architectural details like windows, cornice, decorative brickwork, and storefronts. Care should be taken to ensure they don't interfere with the sight lines of adjoining buildings.

Style

When deciding on a style of sign, context should be considered to ensure the design is consistent with the surrounding neighbourhood appearance. Signs should be of a style, size, material and appearance consistent with the architecture of the main structure on the property. Ornate signs or signs based on architectural styles inappropriate to the commercial architecture of the era and area should be avoided.

Scale

Signs should be simple and scaled to be legible to pedestrians and/or those in slow passing vehicles, and they should not impose on pedestrian traffic or disturb the continuity of the streetscape. They should also be small enough that they don't overpower buildings originally designed for non-commercial purposes.

Signage Considerations

The City of Saint John's Practical Conservation Guideline for Signs in Heritage Conservation Areas suggests a number of general considerations for signs worth considering:

- Use a variety of sign locations - storefront, upper wall, roof and windows
- Use traditional materials
- Use dark colours and strong contrast between letters and backgrounds
- Use basic shapes, such as squares, circles and ovals
- Use straightforward lettering
- Use moulded frames
- Use painted raised or hand-carved letters
- Use letters sized for pedestrians, or slow moving traffic
- Use sizes to fit the area on the building where the sign is located

Lighting

Lighting the surface of a sign may be desirable, depending on the character of the building and adjacent structures. Back lit signs and awnings, neon signs and flashing lights are normally not recommended on historic streetscapes.

Colours

The colours used in a sign should be consistent with the colour scheme of the structure they are affixed to. Common colours used in the 1800s include dark green, dark brown and black, and were quite limited as the focus was on achieving contrast.

Lettering

Lettering should be used that has a simple traditional design, like block-style and serif style. Ensure that text is large enough to have an impact at a distance, and that the letters are clear enough to be legible. Contrast with the background is also important, and letters should be painted in high contrast to the sign panel colour.

As a general rule, fascia signs mounted on a storefront, parallel to the street, can only be read from approximately 90 feet away. The following chart recommends the best letter heights to maximize readability:

Letter Height	Maximum Impact	Viewable Distance
2"	20'	200 feet
6"	60'	600 feet
8"	80'	800 feet
10"	100'	1,000 feet
12"	120'	1,200 feet

Retaining Historic Signs

Original historic signs should be retained whenever possible, especially when they are:

- Associated with historic figures, events or places.
- Significant as evidence of the history of a product, business or service advertised.
- Significant in reflecting the history of the building or the development of the heritage district (a sign may be the only indicator of a building's historic use).

- Characteristic of a specific historic period, such as goldleaf on glass, neon, or stainless steel lettering.
- Integral to the building's design or physical fabric, for example, when the name of the historic business or the date is etched in stone, metal or tile. In such cases, removal can harm the integrity of a heritage property's design, or cause damage to its materials.
- Outstanding examples of a signmaker's art, whether because of their craftsmanship, use of materials, or design.
- Local landmarks that are recognized and appreciated by a community.
- Elements important in defining the character of an area, like marquees in a theater district.

Maintaining and Repairing Historic Signs

Maintenance of historic signs is essential for their long-term conservation. Sign maintenance involves periodic inspections for signs of damage and deterioration, such as burnt out light bulbs, peeling paint, weakened or missing screws and bolts, dirt and debris accumulation. As well, water collecting in or on signs could damage electrical connections. The source of water penetration should be identified and sealed. Most of these minor repairs are routine maintenance measures that don't require special expertise, but should still be done carefully.

More extensive repairs should be undertaken by professionals. The sign industry is large and active. Sign designers, fabricators and skilled craftsmen are located throughout the Region. Once in danger of being lost altogether, gold leaf on glass and porcelain enamel are undergoing revivals, and the art of bending neon tubes is now more common. Finding help from qualified sources shouldn't be hard, but before contracting for work on historic signs you should check references and view other projects completed by the same company.

Major repairs may require removal of the sign to a workshop. Since signs are sometimes damaged while the building is undergoing repair, work on the building should be scheduled while the sign is in the shop. If the sign remains in place, it should be protected while the work is being done.

Repairing Historic Sign Materials

This section discusses repair techniques for specific sign materials. The overall goal in repairs is to restore only the damaged portions of a sign that is otherwise in good condition. Remember that the apparent age of a historic sign is one of its major features. Efforts should be made to avoid "over restoring" to prevent all evidence of a sign's age being lost, even though the original design and form may be recaptured.

Goldleaf or Gilding

Surface-gilded signs, for example gilded raised letters or symbols found on the exterior of a building, generally last 40 years. Damage to these signs results from weather and abrasion. Damage to gilded signs on glass normally occurs when the protective coating applied over the gilding is removed by harsh cleaning chemicals or scratched by scrub brushes. This type of damage will cause the sign to flake off.

Historic gilded signs can be repaired, typically by regilding damaged areas. An oil size is painted on the surface and then gold leaf is applied when the surface has become "tacky." Similarly, historic "reverse on glass" goldleaf signs can be repaired, by experts. A sample of the flaking sign is taken to determine its composition. Reverse on glass signs use goldleaf ranging from 12-23 karats. The gold is alloyed with copper and silver in different amounts for variations in colour. The damaged portions of the sign are then regilded the same way they were historically. First, the inside surface of the glass is coated with a gelatin and then gold leaves roughly three inches square are spread over the area. The new letter or design is then drawn in reverse on the new leaf, and coated with a backing paint (usually a chrome yellow). With the new design sealed, the rest of the leaf is removed and it is covered with a clear, water-resistant varnish.

Gilded signs, both surface and reverse on glass, can be cleaned gently with soap and water, using a soft cloth. And for glass signs, the varnish backing should be replaced at least every seven years.

Porcelain Enamel

Porcelain enamel is one of the most durable materials used in signs and it keeps its high gloss and colour for decades. This type of sign is almost maintenance free as the surface is essentially glass. Dirt can be washed off with soap and water or a glass cleaner.

This type of sign can be damaged if struck by stones or other sharp objects. If the enamel surface and undercoat are scratched, the metal surface can rust at the impact site. The rust will not spread behind the glass but will remain in a localized area due to the strong bond between the glass and metal. However, if the sign edges were not enameled they can rust. To address this problem, clean the rust carefully and touchup the area with cold enamel (a type of epoxy used in jewelry) or enamel paints. Should a porcelain enamel sign become dented it is best not to try to fix it as attempting to hammer out the dents risks further damage.



Image: Repair of a goldleaf sign
(The Sign Depot, 2014)

Wall Signs

Painted wall signs, if not touched up over the years, will begin to peel and fade as a result of exposure to the elements. In this state the signs are often referred to as “ghost signs” as they have been weathered and faded to the extent that they have lost their original brightness and visibility. It is a recommended best practice to leave ghost signs intact on a building façade, and to avoid painting over or removing them.

Wall signs were originally painted with oil-based house paints. Much of the paint that remains visible today likely contains lead, which keeps the paint strongly adhered to the masonry surface. New products for consolidation are available that structurally stabilize both the components of the paint and the masonry substrate. Consultation with a professional that specializes in wall sign conservation and/or rehabilitation, often referred to as “Wall Dogs,” is recommended before restoring a historic sign to ensure that the proper materials and colours are used.

Neon

Neon signs typically last 20-25 years, but some can last up to 50 years. When a neon sign breaks, it is not because the gas has failed, but because the system surrounding it has broken down. For example, the glass tubes may have been broken letting the gas escape, or the electrodes or transformers may have failed. If the tube is broken, a new one must be made by a highly skilled “glass bender.”

Neon gas (neon or mercury-argon) gives different colour light: neon gives red light and mercury-argon produces blue. Other colours result from using coloured glass and various phosphor coatings inside the tube. Green, for example, can be produced by using mercury-argon in yellow glass. Since colour is so important in neon signs, it is key to determine the original colour or colours. A neon studio can assist with this using a number of specialized techniques.

A failing transformer can cause the neon sign to flicker, and may have to be replaced. Flickering neon can also indicate a problem with the gas pressure inside the tube. If so, the gas must be re-pumped. Repairs to neon signs also include mending the surrounding components of the sign. The metal cans that often serve as backdrops to the tubing may need cleaning, or scraping and repainting if they rust.

Similarly to gilded signs, repair of neon signs should be undertaken by a professional.

Reusing Historic Signs

Historic signs associated with former businesses should be reused after a building or business changes hands. If possible:

- Keep the historic sign, unaltered. It is often possible to do this even when the new business is different from the old. Retaining an old sign can be a good marketing strategy, playing on the recognition value of the previous company name and associated public fondness for the sign. This is especially true when the sign is a community landmark.
- Relocate the sign to the interior, such as in the lobby or above the bar in a restaurant, if it is not possible to retain it on the exterior of the building. Although this is not the ideal option, it does preserve the sign and allows the opportunity to return the sign to its historic location in the future.
- Modify the sign to reflect the new business. This should only be done if the modifications will not destroy essential features.

If these options are not possible, the sign could be donated to a local museum, historical society or other group.

Sign Bylaws

Many of the Region's municipalities have enacted sign bylaws to regulate the number, size, placement and type of signs permitted in an area, with often more prescribed guidelines in Heritage Conservation Districts. Owners are asked to complete a sign permit application outlining the specifications of their proposed sign for municipal approval. Approved materials may be outlined in this process, with wood often encouraged, and plastic discouraged. Sign bylaws can also specify lighting sources: indirect illumination (light shining onto the sign) is often required instead of neon tubing, bare light bulbs, or backlighting. It is not uncommon for a municipality to require signs to be compatible in colour and other design qualities to the building and the overall appearance of the streetscape.

It should be noted that sign bylaws are not without problems. They can impose a uniformity that falsifies history. It is important that sign designs are simple without attempting to create a pseudo-historic appearance.

New Signs and Heritage Buildings

Although preserving old signs on heritage buildings is worthwhile, so too is the creation of new signs that are sympathetic to the building's history and architecture. This is interesting as some historic sign practices were not "sympathetic" to buildings and can now be learned from and avoided.

It has been observed that many efforts to control signage leads to monotonous, uncreative signs. For this reason the US National Park Service discourages the adoption of local guidelines that are too restrictive, and that dictate uniform signs within commercial districts. Instead, they encourage

communities to promote diversity in sign sizes, types, colours, lighting, lettering, etc. Business owners are also encouraged to choose signs that reflect their own tastes, values, and personalities, but which also respect the integrity of the building and context of the surrounding community.

The US National Preservation Services suggests consideration of the following points when designing and constructing new signs for heritage buildings:

- Signs should be viewed as part of an overall graphics system for the building. They do not have to do all the "work" by themselves. The building's form, name and features, both decorative and functional, also support the advertising function of a sign. Signs should work with the building, rather than against it.
- New signs should respect the size, scale and design of the historic building. Often features or details of the building will suggest a motif for new signs.
- Sign placement is important and new signs should not obscure significant features of the historic building. For example, signs above a storefront should fit within the historic signboard.
- New signs should also respect neighbouring buildings. They should not shadow or overpower adjacent structures.
- Sign materials should be compatible with those of the historic building. Materials characteristic of the building's period and style, used in contemporary designs, can form effective new signs.
- New signs should be attached to the building carefully, both to prevent damage to historic fabric, and to ensure the safety of pedestrians. Fittings should be affixed to mortar joints rather than brick and sign loads should be properly calculated and distributed.

Summary

With the rise of chain stores and franchises, mass-produced signs have largely replaced historic local signs that differed from owner to owner and from signmaker to signmaker. This has resulted in the elimination of regional differences and local character. Although this trend toward sameness has been observed, it is interesting that some crafts, such as gold-leafing and porcelain enameling have experienced a revival in recent decades. The preservation of historic signs is one way to ensure that at least some of these traces of local history continue to enliven our streets, representing the past commercial history that helped to shape our communities.

References

If you would like to learn more about signage as it relates to your heritage property, please refer to the following primary sources:

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