Regulating Historic Signs

Planning Webcast Series
Sponsored by the County Division

April 5, 2019
Speakers

- James Carpentier AICP – Moderator
  - Director State & Local Government Affairs/International Sign Association
- Al Barna/Randall Ann Homan
  - San Francisco Neon/Historic Neon Network
- Lannette M. Schwartz, MHC
  - Historic Sign Conservation, Consultant
- Stephanie Cisneros
  - Preservation Planner, San Francisco Planning Department
Takeaways

• Understand neon signs
• Understand approaches in Burbank, Los Angeles and San Francisco
• Keys to developing historic sign regulations
• What makes a sign “historic” vs. “vintage”
Your Favorite Historic Sign

• Send us the city, state and name of your favorite historic sign
• Tell us why it is your favorite sign
• The panel will talk about your favorite sign!
Presentations

- [www.signs.org/planners](www.signs.org/planners) - presentation, Saving Neon Best Practices Guide, Burbank Regulations and other resources at this link
SAN FRANCISCO NEON

Al Barna and Randall Ann Homan, sfneon.org
ANATOMY OF A NEON SIGN
SIGN SCIENCE: AURORA BOREALIS

HTTP://HDWALLPAPERDAILY.COM/RED-AURORA-BOREALIS-WALLPAPER.HTML
ATOM of NEON

PROTONS

8 NEGATIVE ELECTRONS

INNER ORBIT
2 NEGATIVE ELECTRONS

OUTER ORBIT
SIGN SCIENCE: INSIDE A NEON TUBE

VARIATION OF AN ILLUSTRATION BY MEL MORRIS NEON LABORATORIES, 1930, FROM NEW YORK NEON (W. W. NORTON) BY THOMAS E. RINALDI
THE PHENOMENA OF NEON LIGHT

VARIATION OF AN ILLUSTRATION BY MEL MORRIS NEON LABORATORIES, 1930, FROM NEW YORK NEON (W. W. NORTON) BY THOMAS E. RINALDI
ELECTRIFIED COLORS OF NOBLE GASES

Neon
Argon
Krypton
Xenon
Helium

SOURCE: BOUNDLESS.COM/CHEMISTRY/
COLORFUL PHOSPHOR COATED TUBES
COLORFUL PHOSPHOR COATED TUBES
TIN CANS: FROM ADVERTISING TO ART
SIGN TYPOLOGY

VARIATION OF AN ILLUSTRATION FROM NEW YORK NEON (W. W. NORTON) BY THOMAS E. RINALDI
Describe a neon sign in your community. Has it become a local landmark?
QUESTIONS

Is there a neon sign in your neighborhood that has become a local landmark?

Is the sign a candidate for restoration? Why?
1960

1965

VINTAGE POSTCARDS FROM SF NEON COLLECTION
Golden Star Radio, 1940s. From 1939 to 1979, the Golden Star Chinese Hour provided Chinatown with the latest news and entertainment on KBAG-FM (105.3 FM). Every weeknight from 9:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. and every Saturday from 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., families and businesses tuned in to hear Mary Chinn-Tong (right) deliver the news on events in China, the United States, and the Chinese American community from her husband, Thomas Tong’s, studio at 846 Clay Street. (Courtesy of National Archives.)
PATINA & PAINT

Q: The paint on our sign is peeling and it looks interesting. Do we have to repaint the sign? Should we take the sign down to paint it? How often does a sign need to be repainted?

A: After decades of neglect, a vintage sign might have a fascinating patina of peeling paint. In the next ten years, all of the paint could be gone with nothing left but a rust-colored cabinet. Paint is the best way to protect the sign. Whenever possible, save the vintage sheet metal instead of using aluminum as a replacement.

Patina is not fine art, but it is part of an unpainted sign kept outdoors. You can try to slow the patina process with a clear coat, but it will peel and flake or a different rate, complicating problems. For specific parts or automotive-grade paint is the best protection. Usually, vintage signs are repainted in place with a roller for the background and a brush for lettering. Removing a sign for restoration is problematic because it is easy to damage the sign as you take it down. Sign removal can be done successfully, but it takes more time and requires working with local planning agencies and securing permits. Sand the old paint first to reveal any layers of older painting, and photograph it for historical documentation. Then scrape or use a chemical stripper to remove old paint down to the bare metal of the sign and prime for painting. Paint or with sign-specific or automotive-grade paint. One shot and/or fillers are sign-specific paints that are perfect for hand lettering. It is important to use paint that is graded for outdoors and metal.

Anmer: neon signs we are converting, approximately 50 to 70 years.

Galvanized metal signs require a specific self-stitching primer. Failure to use the self-stitching primer will result in failure of the patina and flaking in a matter of months because paint does not adhere to a galvanized surface. Always use primer and two coats of neon sign on the background and the neon sign fixture. Painting letters by hand with a brush is best practice, no vinyl letters - they might be cheaper but is not traditional and will shrink and peel faster than paint.

ANIMATED SIGNS & LED BULBS

Q: What about the animated neon signs with flashing bulbs? Should incandescent bulbs or neon tubes be replaced with LEDs?

A: Animated signs are controlled by a mechanical unit, sometimes called a sequencer unit, inside the cabinet. A sequencer basically turns the electrical conductors on and off in different parts of the sign in sequence. A damaged unit can be repaired or rebuilt. Original units should be saved, they hold clues to the timing and sequence of the sign’s original animation design. Incandescent bulbs that then in sequence are a valuable addition to a neon sign. But, they are energy vampires. Governments around the world have passed measures to phase out incandescent light bulbs to be replaced by energy-efficient LED light bulbs. These measures will soon serve as a baron on the future manufacturing of incandescent light bulbs. LED bulbs are much more energy efficient than incandescent bulbs. The ban on incandescent bulbs may soon leave no choice but to use new LED bulbs on vintage signs.

Neon signs have favored comparisons with incandescent bulbs as a significant drain on the electricity grid, but a neon sign consumes much less power relative to the brightness of the light it emits. A neon tube uses cold cathode technology. It is not heated by a filament, increasing its energy efficiency and longevity compared to an incandescent bulb. LED signs should never be substituted for neon glass tube lighting. It is just, well, wrong. LEDs don’t have the same ambient glow or color range as neon sign. Neon glass tubes and metal cabinets can last for decades and are recyclable.
LI PO COCKTAIL LOUNGE
916 Grant Ave, San Francisco
HISTORIC NEON COLOR CONSULT
Submitted by: San Francisco Neon, Summer 2018
Submitted to: Darcy Bender, OEWD Invest in Neighborhoods, SF Shines grant program

Specifications from SF Neon
All colors listed below are preliminary recommendations. Subject to review by LI Po and SF Shines.
All paint colors are based on existing colors when possible.
All new colors are based on historical photos, no phosphor coated colors recommended.

PAINT COLOR RECOMMENDATIONS
- P1: 1 Shot Custom match
- P2: 1 Shot 1041 Bright Red
- P3: 1 Shot 1031 Polar White
- P4: 1 Shot 1041 Bright Red
- P5: 1 Shot Custom match
- P6: 1 Shot Custom match
- P7: 1 Shot 191 Metallic Gold
- Top lantern pole
- Lantern cap
- Lantern G & R letters
- Lantern cabinet background
- Lantern cabinet base trim
- Porcelain cabinet return, lantern cabinet base
- Bell Fantals

GLASS TUBE COLOR RECOMMENDATIONS
- N1: Norsat gold colored glass
- N2: Clear pumped Neon red
- N3: Emerald colored glass
- N4: Norsat gold colored glass
- N5: Clear pumped Angola with mercury
- LI Po on 4 lantern faces
- Lantern border glass
- Arrow on porcelain cabinet top
- LI Po on porcelain cabinet face
- COCKTAILS on porcelain cabinet

Specifications from Arrow Sign Company
- Replace all neon housing and tube supports
- Rewire all primary and secondary wiring
- Manufacture and install all neon glass tubes (both cabinets) except top decorative crown sections on lantern sign
- Supply and install new neon housing and tube supports
- Repaint cabinets with 1-Shot enamel paint per paint color specifications
- Faces of “COCKTAILS” sign are porcelain enamel and will be cleaned/reviewed as best as possible
- Supply and install new porcelain cabinet and guy wires
- Supply and install new bottom diagonal arm to stabilize sign. Replace necessary wiring conduit as required
- Supply and install one single pole, time clock to existing easily recognizable dedicated circuit
- Any new neon transformers, if needed to be replaced at additional time and material basis
- Any damaged, rusted metal or unforeseen conditions to be addressed and rehabilitated at a time and materials basis.

SAN FRANCISCO NEON
HISTORIC SIGN NETWORK
AL BARN + RANDALL ANN HOMAN
415-272-7623 • SFNEONBOOK@GMAIL.COM
APRIL IS NEON MONTH

April 1-30 Tenderloin Museum
Exhibition: Neon Family, A Tribute, SF

April 6
Chinatown Neon Walking Tour, SF

April 13
APA Conference: Neon Walking Tour, SF

April 16
APA Conference: Preservation of Historic Signs, SF

April 26-28
Neon Speaks Festival and Symposium, SF

April 28
Neon Works Shop Tour, Oakland

Info at sfneon.org
NEON SPEAKS
FESTIVAL & SYMPOSIUM
A CELEBRATION OF HISTORIC NEON SIGNS

APRIL 26-28, SAN FRANCISCO-OAKLAND, INFO AT NEONSPEAKS.ORG

PHOTO: SFNEON.ORG
YOUR FAVORITE SIGN
REGULATORY AND POLICY APPROACHES THAT PRESERVE HISTORIC SIGNS IN SOCAL

An Interactive Educational Discussion Session
Planning Webcast Series
April 5, 2019

Presented By Lannette Schwartz, MHC
Architectural Historian and Historic Sign Conservation Consultant
WHERE IS YOUR FAVORITE SIGN IN AMERICA?

Photos: sfneon.org

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to the contributors and reviewers who illuminated the guidance with their experience and expertise.

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SPECIAL THANKS TO

Mike Butler, Director, San Francisco Heritage, San Francisco, CA
Jim Dufresne, Director, Museum of Neon Art, Jim Dufresne, Neon Works
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FUNDERS

The neon survey was made possible by a grant from the San Francisco Heritage and the Alice Rogers Harvey Foundation. The National Trust for Neon Preservation is co-founder of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, a national nonprofit organization that, among other things, defines standards for the National Register of Historic Places. The National Trust for Historic Preservation and the National Trust for Historic Preservation formed the National Trust for Neon Preservation to serve as a national organization to preserve neon signs.

SAVING NEON: A BEST PRACTICES GUIDE

SIGN SURVEYS

Q: Should I document neon signs in my area? Does anyone document neon signs nationwide? Which state has the most neon signs?

A: Most signs disappear every year as an alarming rate. Debra Jane Seltzer is a tireless historian who travels coast-to-coast documenting vintage buildings, signs, and statues built between 1930-1979.

Debra Jane’s Immaculate website, DebraJaneSeltzer.com, is a deep dive into the documentation of neon signs. She compiled data from her website for the 2018 Neon Speaks Symposium. The results outlined how many vintage signs remain in each state and how many have been lost in the past eighteen years. California has more vintage signs than any other state (1900+). More landmass, larger population, and historic cities means more surviving signs. Texas has 444+ signs, less than half the amount in California, Illinois has 300+ signs. Washington, Missouri, Nebraska, and Michigan each have about 200 signs total in 2018.

It is fascinating that each state has its own cache of surviving signs. The map on this page shows the estimated percentage of all the surviving vintage signs from the 2018 survey by Debra Jane. But she can’t be everywhere in the US at once, and signs are being released or removed at a rapid rate.

We encourage you to photograph, document, and create a searchable online record for signs that have historic importance in your community, city, and state.

Every state needs a community campaign for its neon signs to be preserved and preserved for future protection. What better way to celebrate the legacy of this unique art form, local culture, and community fascination?
IS THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE (NPS) TERMINOLOGY IMPORTANT?

I. Conservation is a broader NPS term that embodies four distinct treatment approaches.

II. Secretary of the Interior’s Standards The Treatment of Historic Properties offer four distinct approaches to the treatment of historic properties:
   • Preservation
   • Rehabilitation
   • Restoration
   • Reconstruction

III. Guidelines

Website for more information: https://www.nps.gov/tps/standards.htm
POLICY THEMES AS “TAKE AWAYS” YOU NEED TO KNOW

What you need to know when developing a historic sign conservation/preservation approach:

I. Policy
   a) Most cities have not performed a citywide historic sign survey.
   b) Most financial or code compliance “carrots” are tied to a resource that has been identified, defined, and determined by the city, state, or National Park Service to be a “qualified” historic resource.

Photo of the Burbank Papoos
II. Regulatory

a) Most cities do not require historic resource review of vintage signs not yet determined to be “historic” as defined by its sign use code.

b) Most owners of historic or vintage sign resources get caught in a gap where rehabilitation efforts are not possible repair non-conforming sign onsite; or an onsite repair is not financially feasible for a small business owner. Both of these scenarios can lead to unintended city repair barriers that result in demolition by neglect.
I. The 2014 Burbank Historic Sign survey (Historic Resources Survey Report) became the basis and was codified as an element of the Burbank Historic in 2016.

II. It established a starting point and listed eligible historic signs.

III. It answers the question of “what makes a sign historic” in Burbank by establishing local, state, or national historic contexts for the sign types within the city boundaries.

Source: City of Burbank Website: https://www.burbankca.gov/home/showdocument?id=28269
**BURBANK: KEY ELEMENTS OF A CITYWIDE HISTORIC SIGN CONSERVATION PROGRAM**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy / Regulatory Theme(s)</th>
<th>City of Burbank, California: 2016 Historic Sign Ordinance Developed in Response to Partial Sign Loss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-conforming sign repair loopholes prior to new ordinance</td>
<td>Yes. Intended to control use of un-permitted or illegal signage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unintended demolition or neglect of specific sign</td>
<td>Yes. Papoos Hot Dog Show sign. New small business owners at location unable to save historic sign due to financial reasons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New city ordinance developed to address policy gaps</td>
<td>Yes. Codified in 2016.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary program</td>
<td>Yes Legal and business concerns limit program to voluntary basis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historic sign resource survey</td>
<td>Yes. CLG grant to research and prepare context statement, windshield inventory, and voluntary ordinance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historic sign register or “qualified” historic designation</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy / Regulatory Theme(s)</td>
<td>City of Burbank, California: 2016 Historic Sign Ordinance Developed in Response to Partial Sign Loss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgement and Consent Waiver</td>
<td>Yes. Written consent to process the voluntary designation application. Program allows for owner to remove sign if Burbank Heritage commission finds that attempt to find donee and no suitable donee site or economic feasible options available to preserve sign.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sign Treatment Plan</td>
<td>Yes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demolition Stay</td>
<td>Yes. 30 day stay to relocate or salvage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Incentives or “carrots”</td>
<td>Yes. Permit fee waivers. Sign area bonus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covenant recorded with land</td>
<td>Yes. A designation covenant is recorded and runs with the land title.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
HOLLYWOOD: A LOS ANGELES NEIGHBORHOOD WITH A SIGN USE DISTRICT

CEQA EXEMPTION:
DIGITAL ONVERSION APPROVED PRIOR TO APPEAL ALLOWED PARTIAL
DEMOLITION OF CHARACTER DEFINING NEON FEATURES


Source: LA City Dept of City Planning

Photo of Vogue Sign and Marquee by author 2013, 2019
LOS ANGELES CITYWIDE SIGN USE PRESERVATION PLANNING – ITS COMPLICATED!

Citywide Sign Ordinance (LAMC)
- Sign Use Districts (SN)

Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monuments Ordinance (HCM)
- Mural Ordinance

Community Plan Design Elements
- Streetscape Plans
- Business Improvement Districts
- Historic Districts
I. One approach is to work with existing policy framework to take advantage of regulation incentives, such as the California Historical Building Code for qualified historic building or sign:

- Local
- State
- National
I. Create a local ordinance/program relating to ALL types commercial “historic” and/or “vintage” signs (including neon):

• Survey
• Application
• Incentives
• Treatment Plans
• Demolition Stays
• Relocation Options
WHERE DID THE PAPOOS HOT DOG GO?

Burbank’s Papoos Hot Dog Show Sign, charcoal broiled neon flying hot dog character feature shown among other Los Angeles neon signs removed from their settings and on display at the Museum of Neon Art during the “Hats Off to Hollywood,” 2016 exhibit. Source: Photo by author, August 13, 2016.
QUESTIONS/DIALOGUE?

www.historicsignconservation.com
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YOUR FAVORITE SIGN
Vintage Signs in San Francisco

Stephanie Cisneros
Preservation Planner
San Francisco Planning
Planning Webcast Series
April 5, 2019

Photos: sfneon.org
Key Takeaways

• Local sign regulations and programs
  – What are the local sign regulations? Is/are there regulations on historic signs?

• Local preservation programs
  – What role can/do signs play in local preservation programs? What protections can preservation programs offer?

• What is the community/city interest in protecting and ensuring longevity of these historic signs?
Vintage Sign Ordinance

• Article 6, **Section 608.14** of the San Francisco Planning Code
• Board of Supervisors Ordinance No. 276-98
• Passed and added to Planning Code in 1998; amended in 2011
• Conditional Use Authorization required
  o Photos and documentation of vintage sign to prove meets criteria
Vintage Sign Ordinance

• Criteria to authorize vintage signs:
  o Sign proposed for vintage sign authorization is at least 40 years old; and
  o Sign is a cultural artifact that depicts a particular residential, business, cultural, economic, recreational, or other valued resource of the past that contributes to the visual identity and character of a City neighborhood or the City as a whole.
Benefits of Vintage Sign Designation

• Able to keep non-complying vintage signage
  - Restoration
  - Maintenance
  - Relocation
• Does not count against any new signage
Benefits of Vintage Sign Designation

• Illustrates development history of neighborhood/city
• Contributing features to historic districts, cultural districts and Legacy Businesses
Coca Cola Sign

Constructed 1930s/1940s
First Vintage Sign designated in 2012
Doc’s Clock

Doc’s Clock original location
2575 Mission St.

Doc’s Clock new location
2417 Mission St.

Designated a Vintage Sign in 2016
Ghirardelli

Constructed 1915
Designated a Vintage Sign in 2019
Thank you
Stephanie Cisneros, Senior Planner
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Summary

• Follow best practices when dealing with neon – Saving Neon Best Practices Guide
• Determine community interest in historic/vintage signs
• Historic/vintage regulations considerations: flexibility, incentives, relocation, reconstruction, ease of administration
Questions?
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