Contents

I discovered TYPOGRAPHY on a LETRASET poster.[1]

I WAS DRAWN TO THE PHYSICAL NATURE OF THE LETTERS: they were constructed out of Dots, LAYERS, & tubes; THEY SHONE AND cast shadows.

EACH FONT BBEGGED TO BE COPIED. **Drawn**

I CAREFULLY LABELED MY HIGH SCHOOL NOTEBOOKS with STACK Fat Face, AND PlutoOutline, free from the knowledge of kerning, white space, and meta-correctness.[2]

THE TRICKIER THE TASTIER.[3]

MY VERSIONS OF BABY TEETH,[4] Cooper Black, & Octopuss Shaded were surrounded by ornately doodled patterns and cartoon characters.

Less was not more.

In this world of fluorescent posterboard and yearbook signing, REAL LETTERS WEREN'T NECESSARY, and certainly not as much fun.

I DECIDED MY FUTURE WOULD BE IN ART.

1. "For over two decades, communicators have achieved clarity and impact in their designs with Letraset Instant Lettering Sheets. Simple to use and economical, they are available at art, drafting, and engineering supply stores throughout the country.... The Standard range offers popular and classic styles for every lettering application. The Letragraphica Series offer typefaces with dramatic creative potential for the letterer." — Graphic Art Materials Reference Manual (Paramus, New Jersey: Letraset, 1981)

2. I quote Lorraine Wild quoting David Frej's use of the term "meta-correctness" to describe the overarching rules that govern typography.

3. 

4. I learned later that it was drawn by "Grand Master" Milton Glaser. The readers of *HOW* magazine were asked to nominate an individual, living or dead, they believed to be the most influential designer of all time for the position of Grand Master. The results were published in the February 1993 issue. Three Grand Masters were elected: Paul Rand, Herb Lubalin, and Milton Glaser.

to Type

by Barbara Glauber

The restrictive atmosphere of suburbia was replaced by the hedonistic chaos of art school.

I clung to the rigid structure of a second-hand modernism[5] for protection. **Modernism was as comfortingly dogmatic as Catholicism had been.**

I gave up my high school dreams of album cover art[6] and started designing trilingual book covers.[7] But reductivism was an acquired taste[8] – Bodoni didn't shine and Futura didn't cast shadows, curly-cues were verboten.

I purified my visual language with Univers and Helvetica, abandoning the amateur.

I wasn't going into illustration, advertising, or art direction, I was going to be a Graphic Designer.[9]

5. Although the rules of typographic conduct were unwritten and unenforced, Swiss modernism was a style which circulated through books and posters, feeding our Eurocentric aspirations.

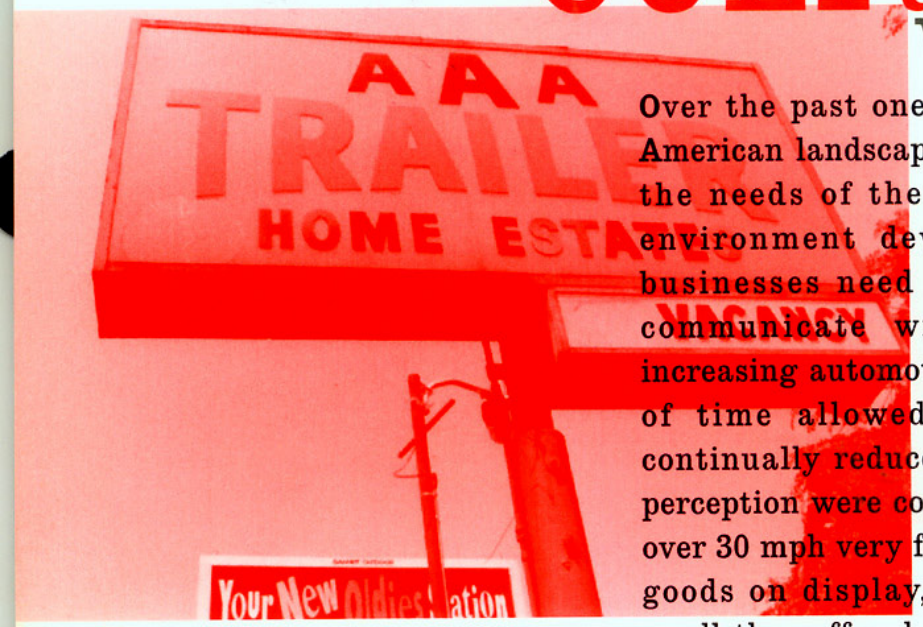
6. Didn't every suburban white teenager in 1979 admire Roger Dean's Yes album covers? And didn't every art-school-bound suburban white teenager have his book?

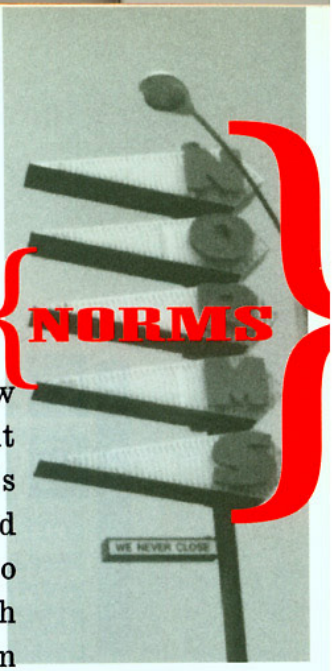
7. Didn't every design student in 1980 have Armin Hofmann's *Graphic Design Manual*?

8. 

9. As a recovering modernist, my pages now use Cooper Black and Helvetica (Rounded). I have had enough of the Univers of corporate America, preferring to design the poetry book rather than the stop sign. My typography refers to its own history and shifting meanings – Gill is redrawn as Gill Log Cabin and the Department of Transportation letters become Highway Inline. Inside jokes perhaps, but intended for audiences who read letterforms as well as letters.

ROADSIDE CULTure/ visual NORMS





Over the past one hundred years a new American landscape has been built to suit the needs of the automobile. As this environment developed so, too, did businesses need to find new ways to communicate with passersby. With increasing automotive speed, the duration of time allowed each message was continually reduced, and some modes of perception were completely eliminated. At over 30 mph very few could appreciate the goods on display, hear the jukebox, or smell the coffee, let alone see a tiny four-by-eight-foot on-premise sign. Something more substantial was called for to meet the communication needs of free enterprise in the evolving car culture. Some began scientific studies of perception at high velocity to solve the problem. Others, following a less rigorous course, reasoned that if it was big and shiny and lit up at night those speeding by would be able to make sense of it. In time a vernacular language was developed to communicate to the automotive public, with individual sign artists creating the norms of this visual language based on evolving technology, aesthetics, legislation, and commercial need.

The residue of this birth and growth of a language is the landscape in which we move today, a national roadside culture

1891 First "Electric Spectacular" erected in New York City. 1,457 lamps in a display of fifty-by-eighty feet read "Manhattan Beach Swept by Ocean Breezes."

1900 Commonwealth Edison forms subsidiary, Federal Electric Company (now Federal Sign) to promote the development and marketing of electric signage.
1902 French scientist, Georges Claude, discloses method for liquefying neon gas to create a red glow.

timeline

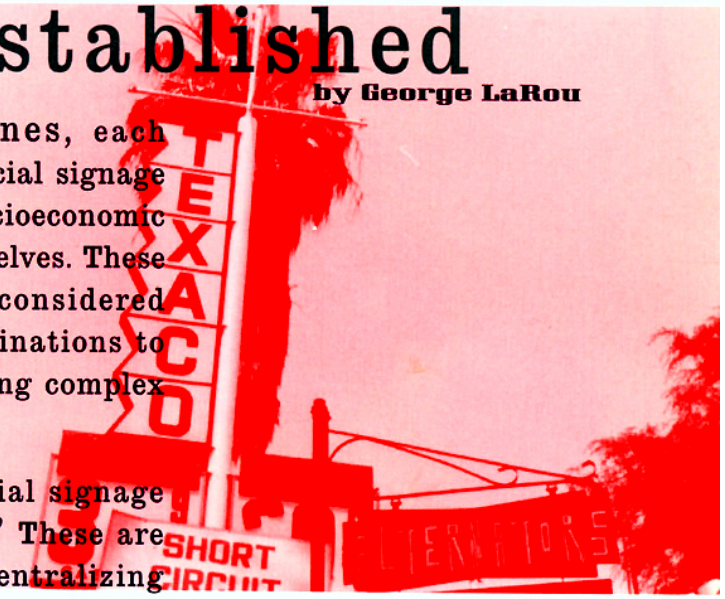
1906 75,000 illuminated signs in use in the United States. Most consist of hand-painted, porcelain enamel panels illuminated by a border of incandescent bulbs

1909 Henry Ford introduces the Model-T, which brings "automobility" to the middle classes. First mass-produced electric signs are marketed, illumination consists of four flashing lamps

& how they were established

by George LaRou

made up of a series of zones, each containing on-premise commercial signage shaped as much by specific socioeconomic factors as by signmakers themselves. These general visual zones can be considered singularly or in various combinations to create a basis for understanding complex signage environments.



The first and oldest commercial signage zone is the "old downtown." These are the areas built before the decentralizing influence of the automobile created "strip" cities. In old downtowns the scale and visual impact of architecture greatly outweigh that of signage, much of which is aimed at pedestrian as well as automotive traffic. This is true even in the subset of cities and towns where shopping districts have been unaffected by suburban and shopping mall flight. In these still-viable centers the commercial signage tends to be a true mix of old and new aesthetics and technology.

1910 Approximately 458,500 automobiles registered in the U.S. Georges Claude perfects neon discharge tubes in red and blue hues.

1911 First municipal ordinances passed in U.S. banning signs projecting from buildings.
1912 First commercial neon signs used in Paris.

1914 World War I begins.

1922 First neon sign imported from Paris by a Los Angeles car dealer. The sign read "Packard," its background was papier-mâché, and it cost approximately $1,250.
1923 New York Times states twenty-one million people per month view the messages of Times Square.
Single displays had as many as 20,000 lights with switching systems which produced animation effects.
1924 Postwar economy creates boom in neon and incandescent signage.
A total of 150,000 illuminated signs, at an average cost of four hundred dollars each, are in use in the United States.
Gross annual of United States sign industry tops $50,000.

The majority of downtowns, however, display mainly the residue of abandoned signage as retailers have followed the automobiles further into suburbia, leaving buildings vacant or converted to offices and the odd artists' loft. The retail businesses

that remain serve the needs of migratory office dwellers and the local bohemian mix. Newer signage ranges from attempts at updating through plastic awnings and computer generated vinyl letters to interpretive displays in sign paint and found objects. Pockets of maintained older signage can still be found throughout downtown areas and are usually associated with restaurant and janitorial supply houses and other purveyors of non-retail goods.

A second zone, closely related to the downtown district in terms of proximity and architectural scale, is the historical or tourist district. The histourist district is an area of the city or town which was renovated or redeveloped to keep central business areas competitive during the mallification of the seventies and eighties. These areas usually attempt to recreate a fictional past and are filled with boutiques, new restaurants, and trendy bars. Like the malls they compete with, they are more pedestrian in scale. The local streets in these areas offer limited automotive access, keeping visitors at speeds in the turn-of-the-century range. Passing histourists are treated to signs depicting a sanitized interpretation of history. Signage materials usually consist

1925 Mail-order houses like Sears and Roebuck continue their move out of cities to cheap land with lots of parking.
Small town economies become decentralized and the automobile becomes a necessity for most Americans. Total number of cars registered in the U.S. tops nineteen million.

1926 German inventor Erich Koch develops the fluorescent tube, allowing signs to display more colors with better definition.
1927 Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and others at the Bauhaus design signs for manufacture by German sign firms.

1929 Gross annual United States sign industry tops eighteen million dollars.
The Great Depression begins.

1932 Franklin D. Roosevelt elected. Road improvement and highway development is fanatically pursued as a way to create jobs and stimulate the economy.

1933 Douglas Leigh begins his sign business which further illuminates the New York's Great White Way. Twenty-five-foot coffee cups emitting real steam and displays with thousands of lights become commonplace.

1934 Walter Dorwin Teague begins designing the classic Texaco service station with fully integrated signage, illumination, and architecture.

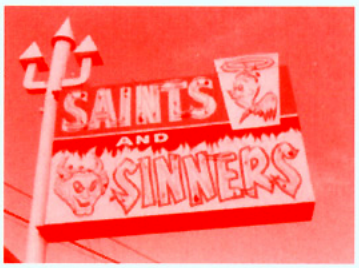
of carved and painted wood, sand-blasted glass, or neo-neon, depending on the aesthetic assumptions of the new signage ordinances. Such renovations, while creating a new history, unfortunately remove all traces of their actual commercial heritage.

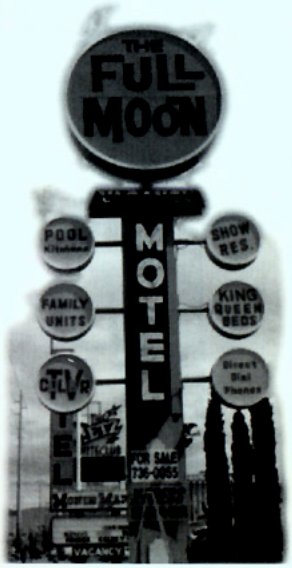
The old strip

One of the few zones which still has an historic amalgam is the old commercial strip. These roads of signage exist in most major cities and most small towns. The old strip marks the first path of urban flight created by the automobile. It was typically a wide street lined with prosperous businesses in the days before the franchise became king, when restaurants had names like "The Chick Inn" and business identities were less formulaic and relied more on the whim or salesmanship of the local sign manufacturer. These thoroughfares emerged in the pre-history of sign regulations and master plans. It was here that signmakers hatched the dinosaurs of signage...the neon, incandescent, lacquered enamel deco to modern of the late twenties to early forties, and the towering conglomerations of all that technology could offer of the fifties and sixties. Ironically, the increasing popularity of "automobility" which created these strips also led to a need for faster and newer routes. As more highways and bypasses made most commercial routes obsolete, a kind of economic isolation began to occur. Just as the strips had drawn business from the city, so the highway drew business from the strip and into the shopping malls with their

a c r e s o f

p a r k i n g .





1935 Teague is commissioned by the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company; incorporates neon into glass and steel facade designs.
1937 Raymond Loewy designs Cushman Bakery facades integrating signage with white porcelain-covered steel to create streamlined storefronts.

1939 An industry survey reveals 95% of signs are still designed by their makers.

1941 United States enters World War II.

1942 Manufacture of metal signs banned due to shortages of materials for the war effort.

1944 National Electric Sign Association founded to lobby for signmaker's interests.
1945 Production of neon signs flourishes for the next three years.
1946 Plastics manufacturers looking for postwar markets begin developing colorfast, durable, and cost-effective materials for the booming sign industry.
1948 Douglas Leigh erects first smoke ring-blowing Camel sign.

1950 Plastics and aluminum manufacturers offer training programs to educate signmakers in the use of materials perfected during the wa

In its new isolation, the strip became the Madagascar of signage evolution. Despite the economic decline, some of the businesses remained, while other old giants died off or moved to warmer economic zones. Gaps in the economic food chain were filled by businesses more suited to local traffic. After long vacancies, gas stations turned into pizza joints by the thousands. Vacuum cleaner repair shops, liquor stores, and other economic bottom feeders filled in the remaining empty shells. Strange new hybrid forms of signage began to emerge. As signage regulation became more common in the 1970s, many of these areas were considered too poor or too far gone to clean up. The signage dinosaurs

remained intact as originally constructed, some now supporting bizarre new retrofits

1951 Production of neon signs soon surpassed by internally illuminated, translucent, formed plastic signs. Eventually, 95% of signs are made with plastics.

1954 With inexpensive mass production techniques, national corporate plastic signage systems become more common. Forerunners like Howard Johnson, MacDonald's, and Shell Oil seek the mass appeal of the earlier, more expensive neon systems of Texaco and Holiday Inn.

1955 75% of federal transportation funds invested in highways. This trend was begun in 1947 and continues into the 1970s. In contrast, only 1% of federal transportation funds were spent on mass transit.

1956 With continued suburbanization, shopping strip malls continue their wild proliferation. The supermarket concept becomes hugely profitable, adding to the growing list of chain industries. Federal Aid Highway Act authorizes national guidelines for design of outdoor advertising signs on interstates.

1957 Corporate identity is updated at Container Corporation. Identity systems become de rigeur, creating a boon for graphic designers and large sign manufacturers.

or standing as fossilized superstructures. At the same time, hand-painted signs by lettering artists and muralists of wildly varying skill and craft began to compete with new plastic fascias, vinyl letters, mobile signs, and backlit lettered awnings, vying for the attention of motorists in this Grand Canyon of visual historic sediment.

Closely related to these isolated strips, but more highly evolved, are the new or never isolated strips leading to or from the highways and shopping malls. The signage on these strips tends to be much more homogeneous due to their development after sign regulation and their continued economic vitality. Franchise operations, large national or regional retailers in shopping centers, and car dealerships form the core of businesses along this strip. The attendant signage consists almost entirely of lower cost,

MODULAR

internally illuminated, vacuum-formed colored plastic signage.

Modular sign systems and architectural facades are constantly updated to keep the corporate identity current with the zeitgeist of shifting visual mass appeal.

1958 Young Electric and Ad Art, Inc. continue to illuminate booming Las Vegas with increasingly elaborate "spectaculars."
1959 With inexpensive materials creating continually larger signs, an increasing number of municipalities begin to regulate commercial signage.

1963 Container and many other corporations begin embracing the international style. Helvetica is all the rage in corporate America.
1964 Peter Blake's book God's Own Junkyard attacks the "blighted" new American landscape, and yearns for more pastoral times.

1965 Highway Beautification Act becomes federal mandate which threatens states with loss of funds if commercial blight is not regulated on highways
1966 Shopping malls continue their evolution from strip malls to enclosed environments. Some retail signage begins a shift back to pedestrian scale.
1971 More cars are sold in Southern California by Japanese manufacturers than either Ford or General Motors.
1971 Attorneys Ewald and Mandelker publish Street Graphics, offering municipalities a model ordinance for the regulation of commercial signage.
Later editions of the book discuss legal challenges to the ordinance, one chapter subheading is titled "The Free Speech Problem."
1972 Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi's Learning from Las Vegas defends the aesthetics of vernacular commercial signage and architecture.
1973 Sign control becomes the norm. Zones are determined, and ordinances of wildly varying degrees of restrictiveness are passed in many communities.
1974 Signage aesthetics begin to change in favor of a more rustic appeal. Carved wooden signs begin a rebirth. Many attempt a return to "simpler" times.

This constant change tends to erase any historic reference more than twenty years old.

The new strip is invariably connected to the interstate highway, which leads to still another zone of signage: the Highway Oasis. This system, realized by the Eisenhower Administration under the guise of a national defense project during the postwar paranoia of the fifties, is often referred to as the largest construction project in history. These roads, which generally avoid city centers, rough terrain, and anything remotely interesting to look at, have a further sanitized look legislated by the 1965 Highway Beautification Act. Extended interstate travel leads one to believe that the continental U.S. is an uninterrupted homogeneous chain of "oasi" consisting of fast food restaurants, truck plazas, and motels named after numbers. The signage at these automotive limbos is the same blend of molded plastic, primary colors, internally illuminated, lurid franchise signage found along the new strip, but with greatly increased scale to lure motorists from miles away. In this environment, eighty or one hundred-foot displays of fluorescent capitalism are

1975 Over 3,000 sign companies exist in the U.S.

1976 The Urban Signage Forum is held by The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Representatives from government, industry, and academia argue the merits of sign control. Nothing is resolv

1980 Back-lit awnings of artificial canvas with silkscreened typography gain in popularity.
These new, improved awnings serve numerous functions: facade updating, illumination, pigeon dropping collection.

1982 Interest in historic signage preservation grows, Society for Commercial Archeology saves Boston's huge Citgo sig

1984 Los Angeles Olympic signage designed by Sussman-Prejza. Confetti takes on fresh new feel.

1985 Desktop computers continue to arrive and people claiming to be signmakers continues to grow.

1989 Most "newer" communities have extremely restrictive ordinances limiting signage color, scale, placement, materials, etc.

1992 You usually have to go to the "ugly" part of town to see the really cool signs.

common enough to go unnoticed. Only when we desire goods or services do we begin to interpret the signage, seeking examples of clean, corporate modernism for gasoline, or more expressive logotypes in red and yellow for hamburgers.

The highway leads to the final zone of commercial signage. This is an area of large-scale planned and visually regulated economic developments such as malls, industrial parks, or planned residential communities that depend on proximity to

the highway for their business. The signage visible from the road in these areas falls into two general categories. The first is the large yet "tasteful" freestanding sign usually designed by an environmental graphics firm. This class of sign invariably emerges from the stone walls and shrubs of the landscape to communicate the visual identity of the development through the use of the latest signage technology. The second is the corporate logotype in channel letters festooned along the huge windowless facade, which only hint at the engines of commerce throbbing within. Both of these categories indicate the extent to which commercial sign language has evolved from the direct sensory experience of the pre-automotive environment to our current state of abstraction. Whereas in the past, shoes in a window implied shoe store, today the shrub encrusted word Galleria only offers the possibility of shoes.

But lots of them.

As our environment continues to evolve it also continues to accumulate layers of commercial signage. Each new deposit reflects the latest communal vision of utopian commerce, and so fixes itself, like all previous ideals, to a particular point on the socioeconomic timeline. Reviewing historic context allows us some deeper understanding of the interconnectivity of visual communication and cultural norms, and how each constantly informs and mutates the other. Bearing the process of natural selection in mind, it becomes clear how a number of broad influences within the vernacular language of signmakers have created a visually homogeneous national roadside culture.

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All photos in this article were taken by the author in 1992.