Historic Signs

By Jennifer Lynne Baron

South Hills Motel

Historic signs add a dimension to our landscape, our cities, our roadside, for which there is no substitute. They bring the voices and the enthusiasms of people from past decades — our parents and grandparents — into the here-and-now. They allow those people to speak today. The richness their voices bring, added to our own generation’s contributions, creates a richly varied and visually stimulating environment. In short, they make the city less boring.

— Alan Hess, architectural historian

Signs draw both our eyes and our attention. They tell stories and reflect our neighborhoods. Historic signs are compelling evidence of cultural identity and collective memory: think of Pittsburgh’s brightly lit Heinz ketchup bottle, Clark candy bar, or the row of choreographed flashing letters that spelled Westinghouse. Smaller business signs, likewise, communicate much about their owners, creators, and environment. Exceptional in its number of traditional commercial districts, Western Pennsylvania hosts a rich visual vernacular that’s missing from many suburban or recently-built urban landscapes.

The South Hills Motel opened on a strip typical of its era that included the Southland Shopping Center, three drive-in theaters, and other independent motels. Though innovative in its design, it embraced aesthetics common at the time.

The sign was a work of individual art. Alan Hess says the South Hills Motel sign: speaks of a time when the architects and sign designers of roadside buildings worked in tandem.... The energetic diagonal lines, the lively orange-rose palette, the careful contrast of stacked vertical blocks spelling MOTEL in sans serif letters contrasting with the off-kilter trapezoid plaque with an informal script “South Hills”... The attention given to those lines, shapes, and colors underscores the fact that it was intended to give people something more than information about a motel. That recognizes a higher role for roadside design, which today’s typical rectangular...
signs ignore. We are all the poorer for that loss.  

While navigating Route 51’s dense weekend congestion in autumn 2004, I found a rectangular red and white plastic sign in place of the original neon. My mind raced through a number of possible rescue and recover options as I pulled into the motel’s narrow arched driveway to communicate my concern to the new owner with a mixture of respect and disbelief, but I was too late: “It’s gone. We threw it away.” A contractor standing nearby offered a clinical description of the dismemberment process that sliced the metal and neon into small sections, which was then hauled away to a scrap yard just a few days before. 

In 2003, fans of such signs formed The Pittsburgh Signs Project to serve as a catalyst for generating sustained activity and dialogue centered around roadside culture, and to cultivate a forum for exploring relationships between humans and the built environment. Participants celebrate the look and feel of Pittsburgh, its layers of construction, and its levels of articulation, but it is part of a broader effort. Chris Nichols, Chairman Emeritus of the Los Angeles Conservancy Modern Committee, explains the interconnectedness:

The South Hills Motel was a terrific example and we fight to save its Googie cousins out here in the West on an almost daily basis. Threats from private developers, sign codes, and neglect and decay attack from all angles. We are lucky to have a network of like-minded people all over the country working for the common goal of retaining the best examples of this art and craft for the future they were meant to live in.

The Pittsburgh Signs Project welcomes members and encourages people to visit its website www.pittsburghsigns.org to submit original images, comments, and stories.

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2. Renowned contemporary architect John Lautner originated the style that would later be redefined (and renamed) in 1949 as Googie when he designed Googie’s coffee shop on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles. Architecture Online www.spaceagecity.com/googie.


