

HISTORIC SIGNS

By Jennifer Lynne Baron

Allegheny YMCA

On November 7, 1927, one month after President Coolidge spoke at Carnegie Music Hall in Oakland, the Allegheny YMCA opened at 600 North Avenue, Pittsburgh. Carved into the upper façade of the six-story structure were the four letters of its name, each one illuminated by incandescent bulbs. The Y can still be found on Pittsburgh's North Side, and while the logo is too costly to maintain lit, a mid-century neon sign at street level still shines brightly.

Neon signs, introduced to America in 1923, peaked in popularity during the 1930s-1950s.¹ The North Side Y sign was a modern translation of the organization's 1917 logo. The composition embodies a visual and symbolic balance, marrying the Y's core values—spirit, mind, body—to the streamlined look.² The red triangle was conceived for the YMCA by Luther Gulick in 1891. He chose a triangle because it was easy to recognize and remember.³ The blocky white background and red typeface combine with rows of exposed neon to unify the composition of the double-faced swing sign, which draws the eye down toward the building.

Situated in an historic district and endowed by Williams and Company Steel,⁴

the Y once shared North Avenue with a host of attractions, including the Garden Theatre, an ice cream parlor, drug store, masonic temple, and music school. The Allegheny YMCA was designed by Robert Maurice Trimble (1871-1943). Born right in Allegheny City, Trimble studied at Western University (now University of Pittsburgh) and apprenticed with renowned architect Frederick Osterling. Trimble's local commissions included the Sarah Heinz House, Lawrenceville YMCA, North Side Unitarian Church, and Perry and Taylor Allderdice high schools.⁵

Paula Lupkin, assistant professor of Architecture at Washington University, provides insight into the social and historical forces that shaped the sign and building:



Both photos by author



The 1920s was a big expansion period for the YMCA. Buildings were incredibly standardized. The YMCA is highly bureaucratic; an Internal Bureau Inspector often provided local architects with specifications for pools, dormitories and a lobby, as the YMCA was very concerned with sight lines and supervision. The goal was to have the building do their work for them.

A similar motivation can be applied to the neon sign: “The positioning of the sign is deliberate. Signs were commonly placed on corners to be seen from both sides. The sign intrudes into the community. It is a subtle but compelling decision.” Lupkin describes the building as “a collegiate hybrid, a fusion of clubhouse and hotel architecture. Classicizing details such as arched windows, a cornice, and quoining (light stone detailing), communicate a more elite function.”⁶ The freestanding sign’s stark geometry stands out against the building’s conventional look.

Lupkin likewise explains that signs were critical to the national organization’s desire to increase membership and visibility: “early YMCA signs included gas-lit transparencies that aimed to compete with saloon signage.

YMCA buildings and signs were a way to sell values.”

Bobbi Rimkus, Allegheny YMCA director, describes the sign’s importance to the neighborhood: “The sign is a beacon in our community...

Often when I go outside, people are photographing our sign.”⁷ The North Side Y’s fondness for its sign is evidenced by its numerous restoration initiatives. Angelo Marotto, in the sign business for 52 years, refurbished it in 2004. It took two weeks and included replacing wiring and transmitters, touching up enamel, and repairing neon. Marotto found the manufacturer’s nameplate illegible. When new neon was needed, he turned to long-time neon bender Frederick Niepp, who runs Neon Works in Pittsburgh’s West End and believes the sign was manufactured locally, perhaps by McBride before 1940, as sign production was halted during WW II.⁸ Though a permit allows the sign to hang over the sidewalk, its future was briefly jeopardized four years ago when roofers accidentally clipped its chains and Building Superintendent Rick Flagley rushed to help secure the sign as it swung loose.

Greg Mucha, long-time YMCA member and chair of Historic Review with the Mexican War Streets Society, reflects on the sign’s magnetism: “In my lifetime, it has been here forever. It is a wonderful and clever design. It is part of North Side history and just fits in.” Director Rimkus concurs: “The sign will always be a part of the YMCA. If it is not turned on at dusk, a member or neighbor

will remind us to turn it on. We have two switches, one for the letters and one for the logo. Sometimes during an overcast day, I keep the sign on all day. It is such a welcoming thing.”¹⁰

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¹ Rudi Stern, *Let There Be Neon* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1979), 16.

² YMCA History (<http://www.ymca.net>) and Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota (<http://special.lib.umn.edu/ymca/history.phtml>). Also see the Pittsburgh Red Triangle, Vol. 3, No. 5, 1928, which features a photograph and architectural rendering of the Allegheny YMCA, a portrait of Robert Maurice Trimble, an account of the building’s inauguration, and advertisements placed by companies who provided services and products for the facility.

³ Luther H. Gulick, “What the Red Triangle Stands For.” *Association Men*, June 1918, p. 774. Gulick was an American doctor turned YMCA physical director and conceived the YMCA triangle to stand for the fullness of life through equal development of spirit, mind, and body.

⁴ *New Member Orientation Packet*, Allegheny YMCA, 2006.

⁵ Robert Maurice Trimble was born into a prominent North Side family, active in local politics and business. Allegheny Unitarian Universalist Church Founding and Early History 1905–1917 (<http://www.allegheynyuu.org/news/HistoryBrochureSP.pdf>).

⁶ Author interview with Paula Lupkin, assistant professor of architecture, Washington University, January 26, 2006. Lupkin’s forthcoming book, *Manhood Factories: YMCA Architecture and the Making of Modern Urban Culture*, will be published by the University of Minnesota Press in 2006.

⁷ Author interview with Bobbi Rimkus, Director of the Allegheny YMCA, January 23, 2006.

⁸ Author interviews with Angelo Marotto and Frederick Niepp, January 19, 2006. Marotto has worked for Seiferth Signs since 1967. He attributes the sign’s deterioration to vandalism, and to moisture created by pigeon nests commonly built inside old signs.

⁹ Author interview with Mucha, February 5, 2006.

¹⁰ Interview with Rimkus.