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CITYSPACE

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The medium really is the message.

by Joanne Aitken

Sign Language: A plea for careful thinking about what works, functionally and aesthetically, to enhance the street. This is a view of the east side of 13th between Chestnut and Sansom.

Photo By: Michael T. Regan

Early in the 20th century, the European and Russian avant-garde theorized about, but never built, the ideal modern skyscraper. Many would claim that the first came into being here in Philadelphia: the PSFS building. Making the signage fit the overall building design was part of the modern concept, which is why the big red letters at the top don't look pasted-on like the PNB letters two blocks away. And although the bold neon is justifiably famous, as much thought was given to the restrained stainless steel letters at street level.

In other words, Philadelphia has a sterling example of how to handle commercial signage. How do we measure up 70 years later? To judge from pedestrian level, not well. The current signage of choice seems to be those fabric- or vinyl-covered frames that have attached themselves, leech-like, to building fronts all over town. Probably called awnings by signage salesmen – which sounds friendly and benign – they are more accurately described as architectural parasites.

To be fair, some of the better stuff isn't all bad. Sometimes the framework actually fits the window opening and has a shape that suggests that it might, in fact, be operable. And sometimes the fabric is clean and the graphic-design distinctive. Even so, there's something inherently ridiculous about a fabric awning covered with snow. And does anyone consider what shoppers see from below? Too often a mess of framing, electrical conduit and bad lighting. Now that festive awnings have sprouted everywhere, it's hard to see how much distinction they can add.

About the other end of the spectrum it's hard to find anything good to say. These are the boxy protuberances with generic lettering above and, generally, egg-crate fluorescents below that obliterate all the distinctive architectural detail of the building they attach to. Cheek by jowl, as they are on parts of Sansom Street, they cast an aesthetic pall while making it all but impossible to find the store you're looking for – from underneath the name on front is invisible and the name on the end is blocked by its neighbor. If the purpose of signage is to locate and entice, these awnings fail on both counts.

So what, you ask? If a business owner's signage is a sorry mess, isn't that his problem? Not when the goal is to promote lively, interesting and varied streetscapes to draw the lively, interesting and varied pedestrians that a great city needs. A fine-scale, walkable city like Philadelphia deserves better. The solution isn't signage controls, which deaden rather than enliven, as the tasteful signage on many suburban strip malls shows. Nor is this to suggest that only merchants who spend a lot of money can measure up – good graphic design costs almost nothing and is worth a fortune in identity. Rather, this is an appeal for creativity and imagination – to get more bang for the buck – whether the image is spare and elegant or wild and boisterous. It's also a plea for careful thinking about what works, functionally and aesthetically, to enhance the street.

For instance, we might start with the observation that Philadelphia is blessed with high-quality and distinctive architecture that generally doesn't need to be gift-wrapped to make it presentable. We might also consider that on narrow city streets – unlike highways – pedestrians and drivers almost always view the entire block as an assemblage, from an oblique angle, not one store at a time, head on. In this context, blade signs that hang at right angles to the façade are highly effective both for wayfinding and to animate the street. We might also consider the appeal of materials, colors and craftsmanship. The scale of the city streets puts signage almost close enough to touch, so the quality of every detail -- or the lack of it -- is telling.

Happily, despite a sea of mediocrity, some store owners set their sights high. May the pleasure they give passersby find its way directly to their bottom line. To name but a random few: Bella's 3-D pear on 20th Street, the Arts Bank neon on Broad, Mid-City Camera at Walnut and Juniper, the parking garage signs for Wanamaker's, Afterwords' keyboard on 12th and all the simple but graphically appealing blade signs in that area: Millennium Coffee, Crispy Pizza (as basic as it




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...eath operable awnings). But the highest concentration of distinctive pedestrian-only streets inside the Reading Terminal Market. Take a walk -- and delightful -- good graphic design and its thoughtful application

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