

Signs of Urban Life: A History of Visual Communication in Toronto Indefinite run, City of Toronto Archives

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***Signs of Urban Life: A History of Visual Communication in Toronto
Indefinite run***

City of Toronto Archives

Michele Dale

Early in the fall of 2004, a new breed of sign began to appear on Toronto streets, or rather, on Toronto sidewalks. These signs were advertisements sprayed onto the sidewalks with chalk paint and stencils, and just like those annoying television ads for medical products, some of the signs were coy about what was actually being marketed. Nevertheless, the interest of many pedestrians was piqued as revealed by the fact that the website clue on one of the "street installations" received 3,000 visits in September. Cheap to make, fun, and boldly insolent like graffiti tags, the sidewalk signs were soon all over downtown Toronto. As intriguing as these signs may have been at first, the allure began to pall once they became as common as trash receptacles, and city officials began to issue tickets for the infraction known as "fouling of the street."

Signs of Urban Life, the most recent exhibit mounted by the City of Toronto Archives, explores this conundrum of our love-hate relationship with signs. Starting with the late nineteenth century, the exhibit examines the evolution of signage in our public spaces, and the effect that the explosion of outdoor advertising has on our lives. The City of Toronto Archives is well able to tell this story, since its holdings include a rich archival collection donated by Mediacom in 1984. Now known as Viacom Outdoor, this company is familiar to anyone who has ever seen a billboard in Canada, the United States, or Europe. Viacom's roots go back to 1904 with the founding of the original firm E. L. Ruddy in Toronto. Ruddy was scrupulous in photographing their billboards and signs, and these images are now part of the archives' holdings. They are a source of information and, for some of us, enormous enjoyment for their documentation of products, design, and political and social messages. They also bring to mind a Toronto past, which is now disappearing at an unimaginable rate.

In nineteenth-century Toronto, the most common form of advertising was the poster composed mostly of text. It was also popular to paint large text ads on the sides of brick buildings. These signs were few and far between and were geared to a pace of life slower than the one we are used to. By the time that E. L. Ruddy started in business, however, things were beginning to change. In an age of mass consumerism, a far larger range of products was available. Soon people would be whizzing by in new-fangled automobiles, leaving no time to read lengthy texts on small signs. Advertisers responded by increasing the number and size of their signs, and by depending more on the use of imagery with high-impact messages.

Inevitably, this free-for-all gave rise to concerns about visual clutter, illustrated perfectly in the exhibit by a series of photographs by William James, which show the street scene as a virtual wall of sundry advertisements. The plethora of hanging signs over sidewalks was a threat to personal safety, while moral safety was compromised by lurid theatre signs and ads for alcohol and tobacco. By the 1920s these concerns, and the chance to collect fees, led the city of Toronto to institute the licensing of signage with controlling regulations. As the photographs in the exhibit clearly show, many vacant lots owned by the city were leased out for billboards, providing a sweet revenue stream for municipal coffers.

A trio of display cases in the exhibit chart the evolution of signs from 1910 to the 1970s. The archives' splendid collection of photographs illustrates how early downtown chain stores, such as F. W. Woolworth and Loblaw Groceries, depended heavily on window displays to lure passing pedestrians into their shops. With the development of suburban malls, however, stores were separated from the street by huge parking lots. Signs became bigger, were put on roofs, even rotated. Innovative retailers, like the fast-food chains A&W and McDonald's, also began to incorporate architectural design into their signs. Thus the look and the shape of the store became the sign, instantly recognizable even when speeding past in an automobile.

Sign makers were quick to embrace new technology and design, notably in their imaginative use of electric and neon lights. Some of these signs are classics that remain in use to this day. One exhibit photo, for example, shows the famous Wrigley's Spearmint Gum logo, which includes a flashing green arrow encircling and leading to the package of gum in the middle. Other wonderful photographs from the 1930s and 1940s show products both strange and familiar, with Maxwell House coffee still being "good to the last drop." One can only imagine how exciting it must have been to see all those twinkling electric and neon signs at night, rivalling the stars for their brilliance.

The exhibit's images from the 1950s and 1960s reveal an increasing use of sleek building materials, such as brushed aluminum, and a new sophistication in design. A triptych of photographs (two of which are the work of the marvellous Hugh Robertson of Panda Photography) shows the Rose Bowl Restaurant, the Embers, and the Cork Room Tavern. They evoke an early 1950s vision of an urbane Toronto complete with martinis, Frank Sinatra, cigarette girls, and jazz combos. Leaving this delightful train of thought, one moves on to the



Figure 1. "Sidewalks are for pedestrians," ca. 1920. Photographer: William James.

signs of more recent times. The archives has used a superb selection of colour photographs to illustrate some great Toronto signs, including Honest Ed's, and Yonge Street's Pizza Pizza and Sam the Record Man.

Coming to the end of Signs of Urban Life, the visitor is asked to consider the number and kinds of signs that face the modern urbanite. While there are certainly fewer signs than at the height of their popularity, we are now seeing clusters of signs so massive that one is hard pressed to take them in. A fascinating study of the corner of Yonge and Dundas Streets shows how this perennial mecca for signs is now dominated by electronic monsters six stories high. The exhibit also looks at urban graffiti and "tagging" as expressions of the right of individuals to make signs and leave their marks. The integration of the aesthetic of graffiti into mainstream advertising, however, has blurred the line between these free spirits and the corporate world. Just as with the chalk "street installations" that appeared on Toronto

streets in the fall of 2004, it is sometimes difficult to know the players without a program.

At the opening reception for Signs of Urban Life, one could overhear many opinions about signs. A common remark seemed to be that advertising is a pestilence in our lives, and yet the pure enjoyment of the visitors to this exhibit would seem to contradict this sentiment. Liveliness and humour, colour and information are all integral to the best signs, and surely we would miss them if they were gone. Once again the City of Toronto Archives is to be congratulated on the production of a first-class exhibit, with particular credit going to the show's curator, Patrick Cummins.

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Note: Three photographs from this exhibit follow.



Figure 2. Recruiting sign, University Avenue and Queen Street, 1914. Photographer: William James.



Figure 3. Hayter and Elizabeth Streets, southeast corner, 18 May 1937. Photographer: Arthur S. Goss.



Figure 4. 387 Queen Street West, June 1959