

ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SIGN LANGUAGE ON CONGRESS AVENUE

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A selection of historical photographs of Congress Avenue in Austin, Texas, from 1870 to 1980 conveys changes in the usage of signs over this period and the consequent appearance of the streetscape. These images are used as cultural documents to investigate social and economic trends in urban transportation, advertising, and aesthetics, as well as to interpret a sense of place through impacts of changes in the signscape. *Key Words:* signage; sense of place; historical photographs; urban architecture; Austin, Texas.

Pictures document cultural phenomena, the visual milieu of an earlier era. By filling in the gaps of a written or oral tradition, they reveal somewhat elusive aspects of history. Tax records, old telephone directories, or written accounts provide valuable means to reconstruct places in time, but they cannot convey the look of a city as a whole, from its site layout and the condition of its buildings to the feelings and perceptions about city life that can depend substantially upon a city's appearance. A historical photograph can communicate some information that a downtown street must have provided upon viewing—for instance, whether it enticed one to stroll down it, whether the city appeared safe for walking, or whether it provided variety and selection in its offering of goods and services. Finally, a critical examination of many old photographs and written descriptions may disclose changing perceptions about a street's appearance as a city grows.

This article investigates the role of signs in the streetscape, their reflections of the city at a particular time in its history, and their impact upon the city's sense

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of place. The area of study encompasses an eleven-block section of Congress Avenue in Austin, Texas, from the Capitol to the Colorado River. Sixty pictures of the avenue, taken from 1870 to 1979 and divided into four twenty-year periods and one thirty-year period, reveal sign usage. These pictures place signs in their cultural milieu and serve as indicators of change, including transportation improvements, economic trends, and aesthetic awareness. They indicate that signs do more than inform about the nature of commerce in a city center; they also communicate a sense of the rhythms of the street.

The only documentation of signage use in a city may be through the photographic record. The placement and display of signs on the streetscape influences the visual impression of a city. One evident characteristic of nineteenth-century towns was frequent and indiscriminate usage of signs on buildings. There have been few geographical studies about the historical use of signs in any American central business district. The history of retailing and advertising contributes to an understanding of the construction and design of signs but inadequately explains dynamics of change. Venturi *et al.* (1972) studied sign usage in Las Vegas, Nevada, but only briefly mentioned the burgeoning growth of signs since World War II. Foote (1983) found that contemporary banks, churches, and public institutions devoted a smaller percentage of facades to signs than did shops or restaurants, but the study did not examine historical usage of signs. In her classification of signs as locational, predictive, descriptive, educational, promotional, and situational, Weightman (1988: 69) noted that "signs stand as cultural statements . . . offering clues as to the way of life in a place or region."

Signscapes in the urban built environment influence environmental aesthetics, a field increasingly studied by psychologists and urban planners alike. Analysis of the perceived visual quality of city streets can provide a mechanism to establish criteria for sign ordinances and traffic safety. In several recent studies (*e.g.*, Nasar 1987), shoppers and merchants judged streetside commercial scenes to determine their visual quality. The participants evaluated streets as pleasant, exciting, or calm and determined that the most pleasant, calming, and moderately exciting signscape contained features with a moderate degree of variation in location, shape, color, direction, and lettering style of the sign and the most coherence (the extent to

which the scene appears organized or displays unity). While the evaluation of a sign's impact on the aesthetics of a street is a highly subjective process, the author's selection of which features belong to an urbanized environment is also questionable. "Calming" is not necessarily a positive attribute for a busy central business district, and "pleasant" may be more appropriate in a neighborhood milieu.

Photographs as Cultural Documents

Researchers have used historical photographs primarily as illustrations rather than as evidence of cultural processes, meanings, or lived experience (Ross 1990; Margolis 1988). While photographs themselves are cultural constructs and can influence visual perceptions depending upon the intentions of the photographer and the context of the photo (Schwartz 1995), they can still provide an important source of information about everyday life. The layered analysis used in this study is similar to that used by Dowdall and Golden (1989) to study photographs from a mental hospital, relying upon comparison of the images with the written historical record, an inquiry into themes of the photographs as a whole, and an interpretation of the images.

There is almost nothing written about the signage used by Austin's businesses on Congress Avenue over time. Occasionally, there are references in the daily newspaper about signs or about the avenue in general. The photographic record, however incomplete or difficult to read, provides important primary-source material on the use of signs to communicate messages to prospective consumers.

The photographic archives of the Austin History Center contain various collections of photographers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Chalberg Collection, for instance, contains general images of Austin and Travis County assembled by Alfred Ellison, a commercial photographer who had an office on Congress Avenue in the early years of this century. Many unsigned photos in the archives, however, were not a part of this collection, thereby yielding no information about the photographer or context of the image. Many images documented parades, arrival of famous persons, or modifications of Congress Avenue itself, such as paving or repairing of the road or streetcar line. Thus, the built environment served as a backdrop to the events taking place on the avenue. Other photo-

graphs shot from the center of Congress Avenue record a panorama of buildings leading either to the Capitol or to the Colorado River, the two spatial limits of the avenue for this study.

Sign Categorization

Categorization of signs in this study denotes location rather than design or shape of the sign. Care was taken to avoid the double-counting of signs, to determine the nature of the establishment, and to date the pictures as accurately as possible. In addition, electric and neon signs were excluded from consideration as a separate category due to difficulty in identifying them in the photographs, although in some pictures, the bulbs were clearly visible.

Categories of signs included:

- Commercial signs—any sign advertising the sale of goods, such as books, hardware and drugs
- Entrance—any sign directly over the entrance of the building
- Front wall—a sign painted on or erected flush with the front of the building
- Marquee (or portico)—a permanent roof-like structure or awning of rigid materials attached to, supported by, and extending from the facade of a building
- Projecting—any sign erected perpendicular to the building
- Roof—any sign painted on, or erected over or on, the roof of a building
- Service—any sign advertising the provision of a service, such as by a bank
- Sidewall—a sign painted on or attached parallel to the corner or exposed upper wall.

Austin's Congress Avenue

The state Capitol building dominates downtown Austin, and Congress Avenue, which diverges northward and southward from it, aptly symbolizes Texas's transformation from a bustling frontier to a modern urbanized state. In 1839, demonstrating uncommon vision, city fathers planned Congress Avenue as a grand, 120-foot-wide approach to the Capitol, later built on a prominence overlooking the river. This grand promenade from the river to the Capitol became the heart of Austin, and indeed, the state.

In the early 1870s, electricity, paving, the streetcar, and the present Capitol building were all absent from the streetscape of Congress Avenue (Figure 1). Wooden pole-supported porticos frequently displayed several signs (as well as



Figure 1. Congress Avenue in the early 1870s. Photo courtesy of the Austin History Center, Austin Public Library, #P02442.

serving as hitching posts). Storeowners also haphazardly placed signs under the roof, on the exposed sidewall, or under the porticos and above the sidewalk. Trees, utility poles, and small, iron-step bridges over the curbs graced the avenue. Symbolic signs, readily communicating the nature of the business, included the clock above the jewelry store and the crock on the pole in front of an establishment that sold groceries, glassware, and pottery. A long-time Austin resident recalled one display during the 1890s: “On lower Congress Avenue the widely known Petmecky Co. suspended an immense Winchester gun of wood at an angle of 45 degrees above the mire street. As I passed in a buggy or wagon I was fascinated. All old timers remember that gun”(Wright 1967).¹

Although the *Austin American Statesman* complained that the “din and smoke on the Avenue were simply intolerable” (Humphrey 1985: 80), and others complained of the river of mud in the streets after a rain, Amelia Barr, an early settler

of Austin, contrastingly expressed her somewhat romanticized image of Austin in this time period:

I spent nearly ten years [in Austin]. . . . I smell the China trees and the pine. I hear the fluting of the wind, and the tinkling of guitars. I see the white-robed girls waltzing in the moonshine down the broad sidewalks of the avenue, and the men, some in full evening dress, and others in all kinds of picturesque frontier fashion, strolling leisurely down its royally wide highway. (Exley 1985: 155)

So, despite its problems, life in Austin centered around Congress Avenue. Vance (1962) suggested four stages of retail locational evolution in America, including new merchandising of chain and department stores and mass transit, allowing a hierarchy of retail areas in the 1890s. The 1880s in Austin marked the beginning of “the Avenue” superseding Pecan Street (now 6th Street) as the most fashionable shopping district. Whereas many governmental buildings had earlier flanked Congress Avenue, the avenue began to offer a wide range of goods, including toys, jewelry, stoves, furniture, and clothing. Downtown Austin still was a pedestrian-oriented city.

Balconies or galleries adorned many buildings and served as social arenas—sites for parade watching or for cooling off in the breeze. As they often extended the living spaces for business owners residing above their stores, pictures occasionally show palm trees, plants, and wicker furniture on them. The balconies were not always safe, however, for pedestrians who strolled beneath them. In 1883, the *Statesman* railed:

The falling of an awning shed, a few days ago, in front of the building occupied by Mr. Radkey, should have awakened more interest in this matter than it seems to have done. There are many such sheds in this city, which will not bear any more strain than the one pulled down by the horse at the time mentioned. For instance: The double gallery in front of the Avenue Hotel is literally rotten, and being frequently used by a number of people at once, will be the cause of an Austin horror if not repaired soon. . . . (Hart 1971)

Balconies also increased the square footage available for the commercial display of signs. In early years, store owners utilized as much space as possible to hawk their goods and services. The resultant *mélange* of messages competed for shoppers’ attention. Although this disorder and signage clutter may seem chaotic and



Figure 2. Congress Avenue in 1877. Photo courtesy of the Austin History Center, Austin Public Library, #CO3411.

disrupting as we view the pictures today, business thrived in these early years on Congress Avenue. Abundant in-store advertisements appeared to be the norm for establishments then.

An 1877 photo shows the simplicity of sign design, with black Roman letters printed on a white background as high as five feet and as long as the store frontage (Figure 2). During this period, in addition to the name of the shop, signs often included the type of merchandise sold in that store, such as watches, diamonds, jewelry, books, or stationery. Also visible is the large clock and bell on the roof, a smaller clock on the balcony, and a mortar and pestle above the covered walkway.

These lively images of a small frontier town with its crudely drawn signs displayed in myriad places, its dirt streets that readily became mud traps at the first rain, and walkway balconies that obscured the interior of the business from passersby soon began to disappear in the early 1900s. The period from 1900 to 1919 exhibited more painted signs on building facades, fewer balconies, and the begin-



Figure 3. Congress Avenue in 1910. Photo courtesy of the Austin History Center, Austin Public Library, #C00815.

ning of the use of awnings over sidewalks (Figure 3). The streetscape became more modernized, with brick access, streetcar railings, overhead wires, concrete sidewalks, and fewer trees. Signs became more stylized, with occasional electric bulbs.² In fact, in 1913, merchants clamored for electric signs. The *Austin American Statesman* (1913) called Congress Avenue a “milky way” because the city could soon boast “that its merchants and other business men have more beautiful electric signs than any other city of the size in the Southwest.” These early electric signs of the exposed lamp type, as opposed to the later, more popular neon tubing, consisted of successive lamp sockets on a background of a letter or pattern (Weitz 1939). Some of these early signs featured either the name of the store, the product that the store sold, or a symbol, such as a trunk or crescent moon.

The first highrise buildings (the eight-story Scarbrough’s and the nine-story Littlefield) appeared, with occupants’ signs brandished in each window. Many signs were still personalized. Katherine Hart of the Austin History Center explained



Figure 4. Congress Avenue in 1920. Photo courtesy of the Austin History Center, Austin Public Library, #C00571.

the impact of those signs upon her early years:

Aside from the street where I lived, my most vivid early memories of a locality are centered around Congress Avenue. . . . Behind every store front bearing a name on the Avenue there was a gentleman of the same name. I can see these men in my mind as clearly as though it were yesterday. The 600 block was mainly men's stores and shoe stores. Although we didn't go often into Smith and Wilcox or Harrell's Men's Furnishing Stores, Mr. Wilcox and Mr. Harrell were often standing outside and, as they were family friends, ready for a little conversation.

(Hart 1973)

Horses and carriages were still the dominant transportation in the earlier part of this period, but the wooden blocks used for "paving" kept sinking in the mud. One Austinite remembered the years before the paving: "They used to have iron pipes to pull the water off the streets and into the road, and they had to put planks across the gutters so people could get across the street" (MacNabb 1960). In 1905, the city paved Congress Avenue with bricks. Besides the electric signs, pav-

ing seemed to indicate that the city had officially entered the twentieth century.

In the 1920-39 era, electric signs became commonplace (Figure 4). Most establishments began to utilize signs that projected perpendicularly from buildings. With the increasing availability and popularity of automobiles, street transportation now proceeded at a faster pace. Enterprising businessmen found projecting signs as a means to attract customers' attention from farther distances down Congress Avenue. In 1939, C.E. Weitz, an engineer for General Electric, noted that the neon sign business increased four-fold over the preceding ten years, despite the Depression and early confusion on patents. Electric signs accounted for one-third of all sign expenditures in 1935 (Weitz 1939). At that time, Weitz recognized that the trend was changing from projected signs to built-in designs as integral to the building's architectural plan.

Awnings proliferated, and supporting poles for remaining balconies disappeared as chains attached marquees to facades. Sidewall signs were still common, and the first rooftop billboard appeared. The technical design of signs improved and often displayed product marketing. Coca-Cola insignia, for example, appeared on walls and on individual proprietors' signs. Whereas commercial establishments originally advertised on the sidewall, by the 1920s, notices of goods such as paints, coffee, or tobacco predominated. Because of a lingering fear at the time that chain stores might injure the viability of small businesses, in the late 1920s, the Austin Chamber of Commerce promoted a campaign for locally supported businesses, which must have succeeded as few chain stores can be identified in the pictures (*Austin American Statesman*).³

One Austinite, Martha Kaltwasser, who lived on Congress Avenue, remembered 1931 as the peak year for the avenue. "Back then, man, it was wonderful. This street used to be booming. It ain't nothing no more" (Box 1981). She remembered a railroad depot providing much activity, streetcars brimming with people, restaurants open all night, grocery stores downtown, and people strolling the avenue late at night. Congress Avenue was then the equivalent of today's suburban shopping mall.

A close examination of a 1920 image reveals that the design of signs had changed greatly over the previous forty years (see Figure 4). Generally, white Ro-

man letters occupy dark backgrounds. There are fewer store signs boosting the products sold in those stores, although there is a Coca-Cola billboard along a sidewall. Also visible are electric bulbs in the Dillingham projecting sign, many other projecting signs, and a large free-standing roof sign.

The 1940–59 era witnessed a more modern city, for by then, Texas had become a predominantly urban rather than rural state (Figure 5). Businesses used larger signs and projected them from a higher vantage point on their buildings as automobiles' speed and retail competition also increased. Billboards advertised such items as bread and whiskey, and one free-standing sign advertised gas. "Ghost" signs on sidewalls, vestiges of earlier advertising, deteriorated without refurbishing. Sidewall signs, however, did not completely disappear. Marquees grew less popular, with the remaining ones almost totally supported by chains. The paved-over street and the disappearing streetcar lines opened up the city for quicker,



Figure 5. Congress Avenue in 1940. Photo courtesy of the Austin History Center, Austin Public Library, #P02091.



Figure 6. Congress Avenue in the 1960s. Photo courtesy of the Austin History Center, Austin Public Library, #P15856.

easier automobile access. As balconies and marquees disappeared, more light penetrated store-front windows. Competition among commercial establishments allowed no mystery in deciphering the nature of the store and its goods.

Kaltwasser believed World War II to be the beginning of Congress Avenue's decline: "I've been on this Avenue for umpteen years, and back during the war, it was as bad as I've ever seen it. It was about as rough as it could be at night" (Box 1981). After the war, suburban growth and shopping malls made it increasingly inconvenient to live on Congress Avenue. Kaltwasser complained that she could no longer find a downtown pharmacy open on Sundays and had to ride the bus to grocery stores.

In *Progressive Architecture*, Roger Yee (1974) explicitly describes this and the following era:

Enter the 20th Century, motoring into town. . . . Older buildings were indiscriminately knocked out for gas stations and parking lots to give street facades jagged

toothless smiles, and neon signs and decorative siding were applied like so much mascara. An International trend, to be sure. And an age of darkness.

The most obvious change between 1960 and 1979 involved an architectural novelty, the “false facade,” which, according to Richard Mattson (1983), actually started in the 1930s with government assistance loans to promote the modernization of cities and to revive the faltering economy (Figure 6). Storefronts were either plastered over with aluminum or stucco veneer, porcelain-enameled steel, or structural glass, allowing facades to become giant billboards advertising the names of businesses in huge, free lettering. The open front concept attempted to facilitate viewing of the store’s interior. A streamlined, sparsely designed facade was touted as stylish, and screens often camouflaged the upper stories of offices and banks. In effect, the streetscape became more uniform, less stylized, and commercially blatant as larger picture windows tried to attract more business. The resultant, less individually distinctive facades vied for the fewer customers still willing to shop downtown.

Also during this period, businesses began to take down their outdoor clocks, or simply let them go. One newspaper (*Citizen* 1976) complained that “Joe Koen’s handsome old clock is still there, but it’s apt to tell you it’s 5:20, regardless of whether it’s noon or midnight. And Zale’s favorite time of day is 9:40.” The author mused about the reason for this loss: “Perhaps the downtown jewelers know exactly what they’re doing. Watch sales must be way up!”

During this time, Congress Avenue was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Austin’s Historic Ordinance allowed the city council to designate buildings as landmarks and to create historic zoning, but there was no signage clause regulating sign type, size, and placement. Marc Horovitz, in a University of Texas Master’s thesis (Horovitz 1976), noted the placement of signs as haphazard, “without regard to the scale of the building or the pedestrian, poorly designed and aesthetically incompatible with the spirit of the street and/or architecture they adorn.” In concert with this incongruous design was an even more compelling loss. In November 1973, the *Texas Observer* noted that “the ‘processional experience’ once envisioned as part of a ride up Congress Avenue to the Capitol has been lost; a pedestrian must be concerned with traffic noise, exhaust fumes and

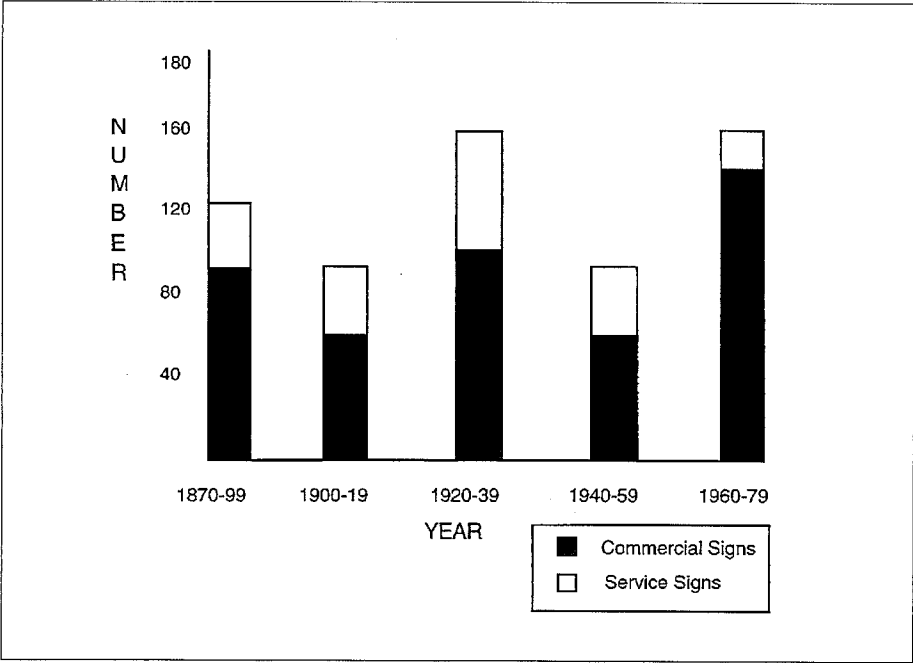


Figure 7. Number of signs on Congress Avenue, 1870-1979.

automobiles.” The fundamental nature of Congress Avenue had substantially changed from that of one hundred years before.

Comparison of Changes

The number of signs varied during the study period. Surprisingly, the greatest number of signs appeared during the 1920–39 and the 1960–79 time periods, perhaps reflecting the need to attract more business during Depression years and suburbanization years, respectively (Figure 7). The earlier time period had also been described as the peak years of activity on Congress Avenue. Fewer signs during the 1960–79 era would be expected also, as more banks, restaurants, and bars moved to the suburbs or to Sixth Street, a popular street for bars, clubs, and restaurants. The increase in commercial signs probably also resulted from increased competition from suburban shopping centers, coupled with few restrictions on sign placement.

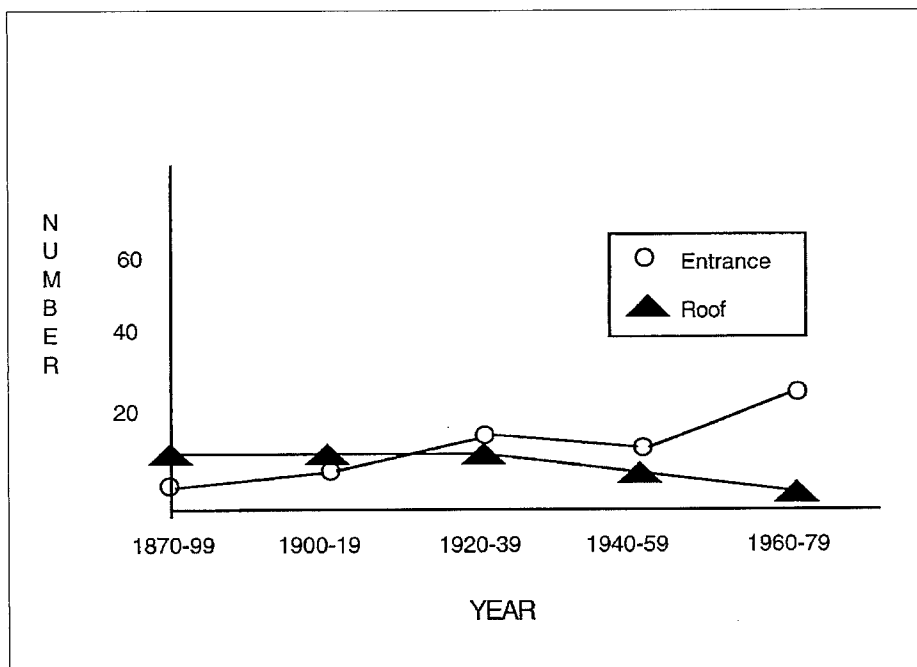


Figure 8. Location of signs on Congress Avenue, 1870-1979.

Signs directly above entrances increased somewhat as balconies and marquees disappeared and owners modified building facades (Figure 8). Although roof signs were never abundant, their use decreased over time. The 1986 Sign Ordinance curtailed their use entirely. During the first period, from 1870 to 1899, roof signs were not freestanding structures but were positioned flush along the front of the building. They advertised groceries, clothing, hardware, stoves—goods sold from the stores beneath them. By the 1920s, roof signs were freestanding, three-to-five-foot billboards advertising various services, such as a hotel, or a tower beckoning patrons to play golf in the building below. Some symbols had moved to the roof position—a four-sided clock over a jewelry store and a mortar and pestle over a drug store. However, brand names sold in many stores throughout the city began to herald the age of mass consumption with signs for products such as Chesterfield cigarettes and Pearl beer. In the next few decades, items such as bread, whiskey, tires, and paint gained top billing along with banks and hotels.⁴

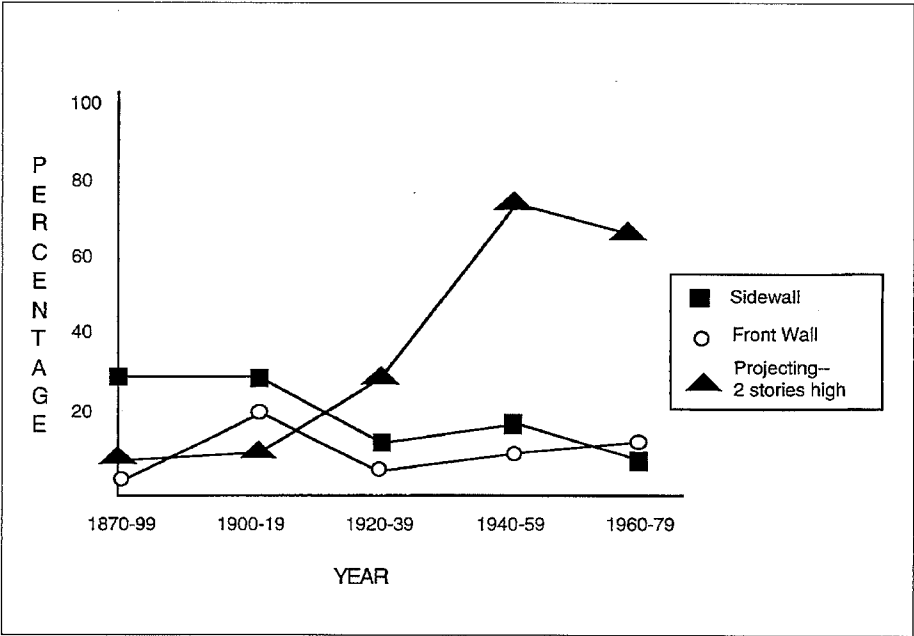


Figure 9. Location of signs on Congress Avenue, 1870-1979.

Projecting signs increased dramatically during the study period, in consonance with the increasing speed of downtown transportation (Figure 9). Automobiles were not prevalent until the late 1910s, but, thereafter, commercial establishments needed a mechanism to attract business from greater distances, resulting in signs projecting from two (and later from three) stories high. The use of front-wall signs flush with the building gradually increased, with its most rapid rise during the period of the false facades. Finally, sidewall signs consistently decreased during the study period, possibly because the use of billboards and projecting signs increased, and the painting of the exposed sidewalls became a dying art.

Sidewall advertising advertised services, commercial establishments, and goods (Figure 10). While the advertising for services averaged about a third of these signs throughout the study period, goods promotion increased to forty percent during the 1920s and 1930s and remained high until the 1960s, when they decreased to less than twenty percent, probably because the venue for advertising brand-name products moved to highway billboards. As in the early roof signs, early sidewall signs boosted the business in that building—be it a hotel, hardware

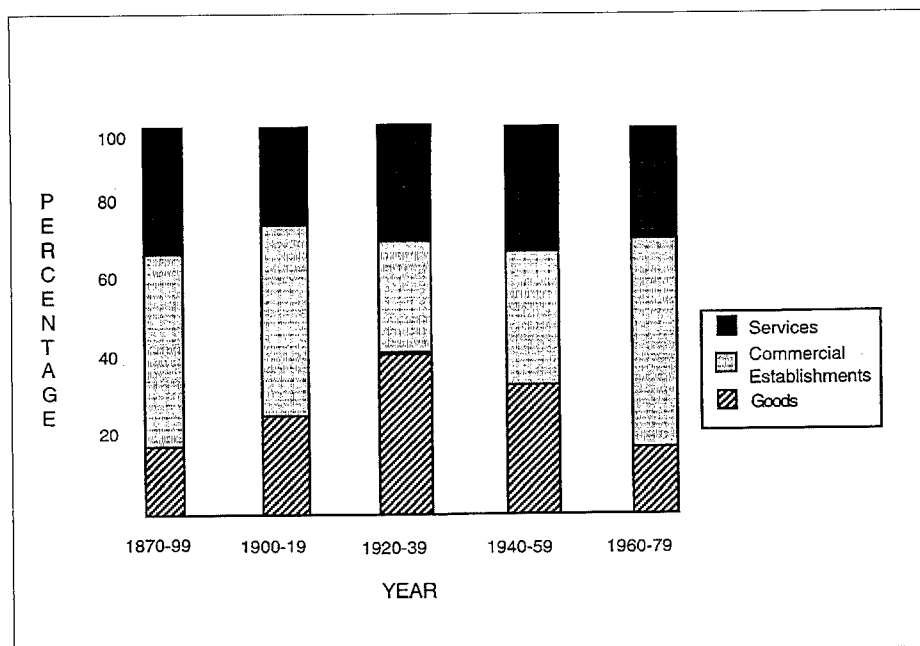


Figure 10. Sidewall advertising on Congress Avenue, 1870-1979.

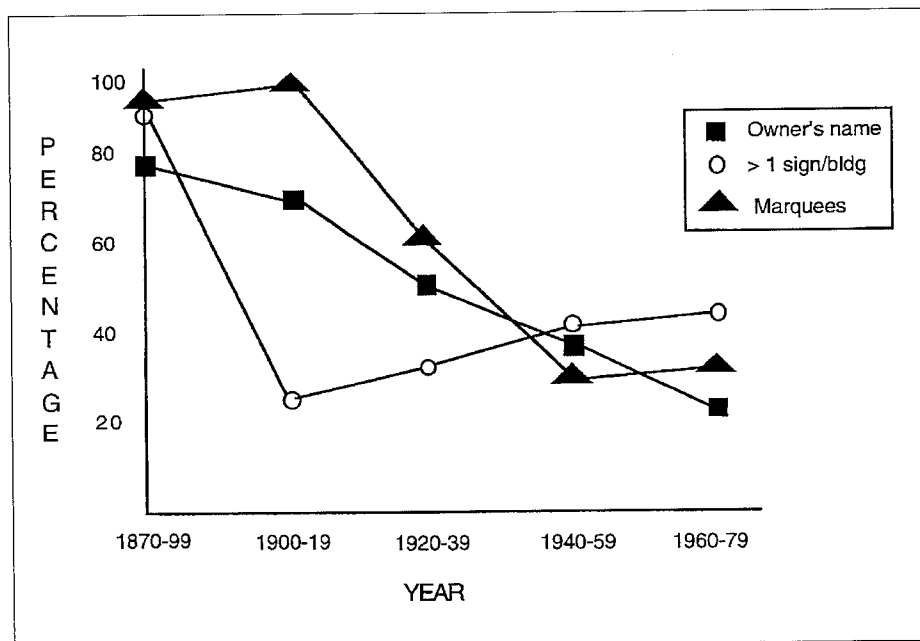


Figure 11. Signs on Congress Avenue, 1870-1979.

store, laundry, drug store, or bakery. In the early decades of the twentieth century, these large painted signs, with little else but the lettering, added a commercial college, dentist, and grocery store to the earlier advertisers. At this time, “Drink Coca-Cola” signs also graced the sides of several buildings. By the 1920s, more stylized signs, such as billboards mounted flush with the sides of the buildings, provided the product name and picture, such as a bull for Bull Durham Tobacco. By the 1940s, carbonated drink companies—7-Up, Pepsi, Dr. Pepper, and Coca-Cola—vied for sign space everywhere in the cityscape, often occupying part of a sidewall next to another business, or even appearing prominently on the same sign with another vendor, as Dr. Pepper did on both a tavern and an ice cream advertisement.

Awnings, some personalized, which began to be popular in the 1900–1919 period, replaced the use of chained marquees (Figure 11), especially during the 1940s. Their use has continued to increase until the present time. They protect the customer from the elements and display names of establishments. Although more than one sign per building characterized the late nineteenth century, as proprietors freely posted signs anywhere they pleased, the decrease in number of signs per building and in the selection of marquee signs possibly resulted from greater costs for the increasingly stylized signs as well as a growing aesthetic awareness that “more” coverage does not necessarily constitute “better” advertising. However, the number of signs per building slowly began to increase in the 1920s, perhaps because many proprietors supplemented their front-wall sign with an electric projecting sign. The owner’s name also appeared less frequently on signs, signalling less personalized and more chain-oriented establishments and more product advertising in the later periods.

Congress Avenue Today

Congress Avenue has changed greatly in the past two decades (Figure 12a). The contrast of the old and new is evident in the streetscape—several false facades with front-wall lettering, some projecting signs (one with a clock), an awning with insignia, modern highrises, and a restored building with one front wall-sign (Schlotzsky’s). Despite Austin’s building boom in the early 1980s, there are fewer



Figures 12a and 12b. Congress Avenue in 1998. Photographs by author.

than a dozen buildings over three stories high on Congress Avenue, and three of them date from the early years of this century. Two complete and two partial blocks of older buildings were demolished to allow for the construction of modern office buildings.⁵ Many historic buildings remain, however, including the restored Tips, Sampson, and McKean-Eilers buildings.

In the early 1980s, beautification of Congress Avenue expanded sidewalks, added wrought-iron benches, wastebaskets, tree islands, and removed many parking spaces. Signage, in part due to the Sign Ordinance, is more reserved with no billboards or roof signs allowed. Many restored buildings and modern offices display few signs adorning their facades, except for awnings advertising their establishments, or small, three-to-five-inch lettering on the windows. Some projecting signs and front-wall signs remain on the older buildings and on the false facades of the 1950s. Few surviving marquees display signs. Figure 12b displays the best example of the older signscape left on the avenue—a full-story projecting sign naming all the brands sold within, a marquee with large sign on the front, and a

smaller sign underneath. There are also signs painted on the sidewall describing the rules for parking. Despite efforts at restoration, many buildings remain empty today, an indication of seemingly insurmountable problems many cities face.

Reading the Streetscape

While the present-day interpretation of the scenes in these old photographs hinges on subjective reconstruction out of the context of time or place, there are some distinctions to be made. Historical photographs eloquently evoke images of Austin's bygone eras, reflecting change from a small, vital frontier town to a busy, modern metropolis, complete with an eclectic mix of highrises, historic buildings, and the ever-present automobile. Part of the appeal of these early urban scenes may result from the complexity of the signs or their variation in size, shape, and placement. On the other hand, the understatedness or narrow range of contrast in signs on newer buildings in more recent decades has lessened the excitement somewhat and diminished the drama inherent in this daily urban theater.

Earlier pictures reveal a lack of restraint in the placement and number of signs, with each business seeking to overwhelm its neighbors. Contrary to a chaotic display where individual whims reign supreme, they suggest a dynamic, unchanneled energy, with all the uncertainty, individuality, and freedom that accompany growth on the fringes of civilization. To modern-day viewers, their images seem compelling, perhaps reminiscent of typical western movie scenes. Despite their large number and haphazard design, they do not forerun the random clutter and dissonance of a modern strip center, whose signs, in concert, encourage indiscriminate shopping. Perhaps because the crudely drawn signs are concentrated on buildings rather than on the street, they do not suggest the wastefulness and excess of today's conspicuous consumption, when even the signs themselves are homogenized and mass produced, but rather suggest unbridled enthusiasm and zeal. Even today, driving past a country store festooned with assorted handmade signs may entice more passersby to stop and browse than a sedately displayed sign in a shopping center.

Adventurous, early-day pedestrians, in addition, must have experienced some trepidation in crossing the uncommonly wide Congress Avenue, but the weary

traveler, who progressed up it, must have also welcomed the security and community that the well marked stores and offices represented. In later photographs, the city altered its look to appeal to busy motorists. Progress became synonymous with easy passage through the city, providing fewer opportunities to stop, investigate, and socialize.

Conclusion

Signage in this study evolved from crude hand-painted signs, placed haphazardly on edifices, to elaborate, flashing neon lights, to fairly conservatively designed and unimposing signs on historically restored or modern buildings. Their use correlated with social and economic trends of the day, from projecting signs designed to attract faster transportation to the declining use of sidewall signs, denoting a sophistication in aesthetic tastes. Architectural trends also influenced their design and placement, as in free-lettering signs mounted on false-front facades. Balconies and marquees often provided locations for signs, especially in the nineteenth century, but with their gradual (although incomplete) elimination, more signs projected from buildings or graced windows and awnings. Restored historic buildings, without the original balconies, displayed more restrained sign usage.

The more open, cosmopolitan image of downtown Austin has become less personalized, less historically authentic, and ultimately less interesting. The clutter of signs may seem aesthetically distasteful, but the complete lack of them on sophisticated, stylish highrises, in turn, leaves the pedestrian without orientation in a world not geared for the ordinary citizen. Although many newer downtown buildings are architecturally distinctive, the achievement of a more modernized and integrated design of buildings and signage may have sacrificed the very vitality, richness, and human dynamism of the street, resulting in the sterility of uniformity and, unfortunately, in empty buildings.

Notes

1. Unfortunately, the author could find no picture of this gun.
2. The first electric sign in America appeared in 1880. The forerunner of the neon sign in 1904 had difficulties with the nature of the gas. The first neon used commercially was in

- 1924, and the general acceptance of the neon sign in 1920-29 resulted from the recognition of its power as an advertising medium.
3. Many articles were taken from the open files and scrapbooks of the Austin History Center. Therefore, there are no page numbers and no authors cited for some of them.
 4. Billboards have come full circle as most advertisers today are local, small businesses. Tobacco only accounts for five to ten percent of billboard copy (Martinson, 1995).
 5. All the buildings between 1st and 2nd Streets, east and west, were demolished and replaced by highrises (One Congress and One Hundred Congress, respectively) as were most of the blocks between 8th and 9th Streets, west (First City Center). Additional changes are new buildings on the southeast corners of 10th and Congress and 4th and Congress and the Trammell Crow building at 301 Congress. A cursory survey in 1998 showed twenty-two awnings, seventeen projecting signs (including two large theaters), eight marquees (including two theaters and two half-sized ones), and thirteen empty storefronts.

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