

LA Show and Tell: The Sequel

The photos intended to portray signage as a problem instead reveal lack of enforcement as the culprit.

By Wade Swarmstedt

In last month's editorial (*see ST, January 2011, page 112*), I wrote about the sign industry's extremely effective response to LA's knee-jerk reaction of drastically restricting its sign code. Myriad representatives from the California sign industry played a role in helping to educate Los Angeles officials as to the reality of alleged "sign blight."

The following is a quasi-chronology of photographs that were originally used to "prove" sign clutter's negative impact on the LA streetscape. However, by using the very same photographs, and showing that they primarily reflected a lack of sign-code enforcement, the sign industry helped city officials under-

stand the real situation, and, subsequently, they decided to leave the sign code alone.

Two PowerPoint presentations, one created by Daktronics regional salesman Ed Wasserman, and one jointly created by CNP Signs' Roy Flahive and California Sign Assn. (CSA) attorney Jeff Aran, tell the story. Each of these uses some photographs taken by Signtronics' Kozell Boren.

"Brent Puniwai in our design department helped with the Photoshop work, and Russ Mace, also in our design department, after I'd explained what I wanted to show, designed and modified the last two images with the Auto Repair logo," Kozell said.

This sequel (and the PowerPoint presentations) also includes information and commentary from

Mitch Chemers, a 22-year sign-industry veteran, who has operated a company called Permitwiz Planning Co., in Van Nuys, CA, for the past seven years. Mitch annotated the offending images to similarly document the lack of sign-code enforcement.

Mitch wrote: "These graphic presentations have been essential to educating city staff and getting them to really think about their proposed changes to the code. Nothing matches the power of clear graphics, combined with facts and well-thought-out talking points provided by the association.

"The progress we've made in a city as large as Los Angeles proves that you can, in fact, take on city hall, as long as you're well prepared, and willing to connect with people on a human level, with visuals and

When *The Los Angeles Times* began writing about proposed changes to the city sign code, back in 2009, it published this photo. The yellowish tint (metaphorically calling to mind Hearst-like yellow journalism, perhaps?) and telescopic view of the 7300 block of Van Nuys Ave. hit a nerve in Kozell Boren. Given his proactive orientation, Kozell dispatched personnel to the LA permit department. As he suspected, most of the signs (23 of the 27) were illegal.





Subsequently, Kozell took a photograph from the same angle, using a Canon EOS 5D camera with a 36mm lens. This view shows what the human eye actually sees.



Next, Kozell took this same photograph, but removed all of the illegal signs. This showed LA officials what the streetscape would look like if the sign code was being enforced. The result, of course, is a stark signage deficiency, not in terms of the number of them, but in terms of legibility. If these remaining signs were appropriately sized, they would adequately identify the businesses, yet still eliminate any perception of sign clutter.

common-sense dialogue that anyone can understand.

“It’s rewarding to watch the transformation in planners’ and political leaders’ viewpoints when they’re getting the facts about signage. We get a lot of ‘wow, I didn’t know that’ type comments. They seem to always start out with their arms crossed and a serious look on their face. After having seen the graphics and asked a few questions, they become relaxed and look like they’re ready to help businesses succeed.

“Despite this progress, many people still view signage as worse than graffiti. We’ve been on a mission to help this city understand

that it can’t arbitrarily change the code in response to the bad eggs. Any changes they propose need input from all stakeholders, so that signs will not only be safe, but appropriate for our community, without hurting local business.”

Already, I’ve received a request for a PDF of last month’s editorial, so that a sign company could show its city council this insightful approach. We hope these photos and the captions accomplish this same goal even better.

Kozell commented, “The compelling message these photos show to city officials nationwide is that commercial areas require properly enforced, functional signage. Rather

than increasingly restrictive sign ordinances, methods of rewarding effective design should be adopted. New technologies should be embraced, like electronic message signs that replace larger multiple signs.”

As a side note, Jeff Aran tells me the LA Dept. of Building and Safety leadership team has begun a dialogue with CSA to explore ways to streamline the permit process and reduce delays. Meanwhile, discussions on the SCAP initiative (*see last month*) continue. Among other things, SCAP would charge all on-premise sign users a nominal, annual fee (\$25 has been suggested), and that money would be used to enforce the sign code. ■

Kozell then superimposed a signage system that could conceivably replace the completely disjointed design of the remaining signs. Again, the underlying message is that coherent sign design is attractive. In this case, it adds color and life to nondescript buildings and inspires consumer confidence about the quality of the business.



Next, Kozell showed how the optimum solution is a mixture of static and electronic-message-center (EMC) signage. Notice how the EMC has essentially replaced several small, static signs. Yet it can't replace *all* the static signage, because, alone, it can't provide a constant brand identity. The simple use of color for both the background and the sign pole adds to this consistent imagery.



Mitch Chemers added some documentation to the sign-industry point of view. He attended many of the open hearings about the sign code and took note of the offending signs, much the way Kozell did. Here are the real signs, which, admittedly, would qualify for *S7's* former Ugly Sign Contests.



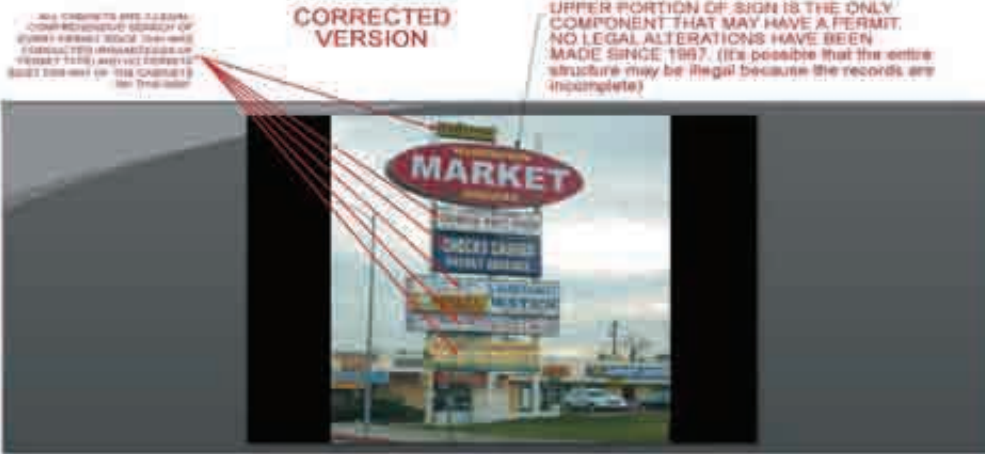
Mitch echoed Kozell's efforts by showing that 13 of the 15 signs in this strip mall were illegal, and the multi-tenant sign was more than twice its allowable size.



Again, Mitch used a sign that city officials viewed as particularly offensive. This one is on Washington Blvd. in LA.

Pole signs don't need to be this gigantic in order to get the message across. The sign in this picture is just slightly over the current limits, at about 47 feet tall, with about 450 sq ft of sign area. In the 22 years since our sign ordinance was written, signs like this have continued to dominate our streetscapes, overshadowing storefronts, window displays, landscaping, and people in a city struggling with gridlock and working to make it easier for people to get out of their cars. We still have sign standards that are dramatically out of scale with a pedestrian environment.

4020 Washington Blvd. Los Angeles, CA



As noted in Mitch's commentary, six of these cabinet signs have no permits whatsoever. The oval Washington Square sign appears to have originally been permitted in 1967, but none of the alterations since then have been.

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4020 Washington Blvd. Los Angeles, CA

45'-6"

All cabinets total 617 sq ft

This sign was permitted in 1967 and would not conform to the code implemented in the 1960's nor the current C.U.P. requirements.