

ABANDONED SIGNS



By Temporary Services



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Half Letter Press 2017

Abandoned Signs

Brand new lighted signs on the side of a building or road exude a strong, yet unreal and unflagging optimism. They are the equivalent of trying to stand and perpetually smile at thousands of people without pause or emotion for years on end. They incessantly radiate hope to passersby day and night. Signs tell a short yet full story about what you can expect to do or encounter in a nearby building or site. They beckon with the simplest of means: a few words in a clean font, neatly arranged, and perhaps accompanied by decorative lights or images. Signs help to order and regulate how we behave, and set the scope of what is possible in the landscapes we construct.

When these signs are abandoned, they continue to tell a story: a melancholic tale of ruin and neglect. The illusion of necessity that they supported, no longer functions.

The photographs in this booklet were taken by Temporary Services (Brett Bloom and Marc Fischer) between 2015 and 2017. The signs are primarily from Indiana (Fort Wayne and Auburn) and Chicago. We document city and rural spaces, practices, and infrastructure like this under the series title Public Phenomena. It is a constant mode of informal research that we started when we began working together in 1998. When the signs are considered en masse, a number of distinct themes emerge. Some patterns we have identified are below.

Painted-Over Signs

A slap-dash approach to terminating advertising is to simply paint over the content of a sign. This is either done conscientiously with a color that matches the background of the sign, or with seemingly whatever paint is on hand.

Empty Frames

Many abandoned signs have their plastic informational inserts removed completely, revealing an empty frame hanging off the side of the building or mounted on a tall pole. Some of these signs have interior support structures that resemble prison bars. Other fixtures are completely open allowing the exterior structure to become a rectilinear framing device for the sky, trees, telephone and electrical wires, or, nearby signs.

Fabric-Covered Signs

When the FDIC has determined that your bank has failed and must be closed, stretching fabric over the sign is an efficient way to mark the end.

Clean Slates

Abandoned signs that contain no text or information at all can have the appearance of comic book thought bubbles, blank chalk boards, or white breaks in the visual continuum of a city.

Fragments

Many abandoned signs retain some, but not all of their original information. Variations include: partial phone numbers, half of an address, letters but not complete words, peeling paint, images but not text, and text but not images.

Reversed Signs

Rather than removing a plastic sign insert, it is common to see signs where the insert remains, but it has been removed and reversed. The backwards images and texts are often readable through the translucent plastic, while also clearly indicating that time's up for the previous tenant.

Weather-Worn Murals and Signs

Hand painted murals from many decades ago, even centuries

past, adorn the sides of crumbling factories and other brick and metal structures. The paint fades or it chips off due to lack of maintenance and the harsh exposure to sun, rain, wind, snow, and other inclement weather. The results can be quite stunning. They turn into something you would like to keep rather than tear down like most of the other signs you encounter

Missing and Broken Letters

Signs made from individual letters will often start to lose a letter or more after a period time and without regular maintenance. This also happens to signs where letters are individually lit. New language emerges from this disintegration. Many years ago we photographed a Shell gas station, where the company name was on two intersecting corners of a canopy. Two letters had burnt out bulbs—one in each iteration of the name. At night, the sign perfectly stated “S ell hell.”

With the rise of cheap inkjet printing, vinyl banners—something that might be considered as a temporary solution, or for a special event—are often adopted as a permanent form of signage for many small businesses. Some businesses eventually upgrade to a painted or architectural sign, but often the vinyl remains for years. The removal of these signs leaves no trace of the operation that left, but can expose the identity of a previous business whose name was hidden under a banner.

There has been a resurgence of interest in hand-painted signage. The book *Sign Painters* by Faythe Levine and Sam Macon (Princeton Architectural Press, 2012) and their 2015 documentary of the same name, chronicles this trend in reverting back to the fine craft of hand-lettering. The abandoned signs of the future, perhaps belonging to tattoo shops, micro-brew pubs and small boutiques selling locally-grown, artisanal, ethically-sourced, whatever, may be more likely to have really nice lettering.



There is a gaping disparity between the daily rhetoric of a capitalist society and a brutally honest assessment of the waste, repetition, redundancy and inefficiencies of so much activity done in the name of business, productivity, and entrepreneurial freedom. In some cases, we are seeing not just abandoned signs, but also abandoned business models, such as video rental chain stores, or brick and mortar stores for products that are now sold almost entirely online.

In many urban centers, we have more disused storefronts and retail architecture than can easily be filled with new businesses. Some of these spaces sit empty for years. Our city officials should create incentives to turn these empty spaces into something more socially meaningful than another private business. Industrial society cannot be sustained. These signs denote a breakdown built into a system that preaches endless growth, and claims to be efficient and democratic. Abandoned Signs are potent reminders of how much energy we put into things we don't need, that are irrevocably shifting the ecology of our planet.



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Fort Wayne, Indiana



Chicago, Illinois



Fort Wayne, Indiana



Fort Wayne, Indiana



Fort Wayne, Indiana



Fort Wayne, Indiana



Chicago, Illinois



Angola, Indiana



Chicago, Illinois



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To see more images of abandoned signs:

[www.temporaryservices.org/served/projects-by-name/
abandoned-signs/](http://www.temporaryservices.org/served/projects-by-name/abandoned-signs/)

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