# Bright signs, Big city

*Graphics point the way to growth redevelopment, and urban prosperity*

BY GAIL DEIBLER FINKE

ITY PLANNERS ACROSS THE COUNTRY ARE asking themselves the same questions: How did America's cities get the way they are, and what can be done to save them?

Neither question has an easy answer. The universal adoption of the automobile, the growth of suburbs, the promotion of a school of city planning that destroyed neighborhoods and divided downtown areas into strictly segregated zones, the rise of the shopping mall — all help explain how cities have fallen from favor. The solution has to be as comprehensive as the problem.

Part of that solution, more and more cities are finding, is good signage. Not just attractive, visible signs for private businesses, but signs and graphics for cities themselves. Readable street signs. Directional signs that really tell drivers how to get around. Gateway and neighborhood signs. Identifiers for historical and cultural attractions.

"Clearly graphics and signage are part of the revitalization of an area," said Dee Doyle, spokesperson for the International Downtown Association. Headquartered in Washington, IDA draws its member organizations, mostly associations that work to improve city centers through a mixture of events and projects, from around the world. Its 1992 convention was held in Orlando, FL, in part because of the city's imaginative new sign program.

IDA members borrow principles from shopping center management and apply them to downtown development. "A mall that markets itself well with signage and graphics is a mall that will be well attended," Doyle said. "The programs and services you find in a mall are also ones that you have downtown. How are you going to share your city with people if you can't tell them how to get there or what to see or do?"

Signs — and signs alone — can do that. Good directional signs attract tourists, who bring in new business, and also invite city residents to venture beyond their usual haunts.

### What signs can do

"Cities are so chaotic that signage is one of the few ways you can help people find their way and make them feel that they're not in a hostile place," said Philadelphia designer Virginia Gehshan, whose work has enlivened the streets of her firm's home city, as well as giving a new face to one of Baltimore's neighborhoods. "It keeps people coming back to cities instead of retreating to a shopping mall.

"Cities have a wealth of culture and diversity that you don't find in the suburbs," Gehshan added. "Signs can make that richness and diversity visible to the inhabitant as well as the visitor."

Another important audience for urban signs is big business. An attractive sign program, Doyle maintained, can spur new development by making a city more accessible and attractive to business owners. Designer Simon Andrews, president of San Diego-based Graphic Solutions, concurred. In the last decade, Graphic Solutions has designed and built signs and identity programs for numerous California cities and planned communi-

ties. Andrews's graphics have helped small cities in their struggle to identify themselves and compete with huge neighbors, and have helped aging neighborhoods such as San Diego's El Cajon Boulevard to regain business and prestige.

"In redevelopment, cities are really public agencies in the role of private developers," Andrews explained. "They need the same kind of sophisticated imagery, graphics, and communications as private industry in that same role."

According to Andrews, downtown decay means more than just losing ground to suburbs. It also means losing business to private agencies taking over tasks traditionally left to municipalities, such as waste disposal and security. "Savvy cities are taking a more pro-active role in this job as service provider and promoting their services," he said. "They consider their citizens as clients. They're upgrading graphics and publications, investing a little more to make them readable and attractive."

City graphics, then, can go far beyond a new wayfinding and identification system to encompass city publications, vehicle graphics, uniforms, and logo marks for city divisions.
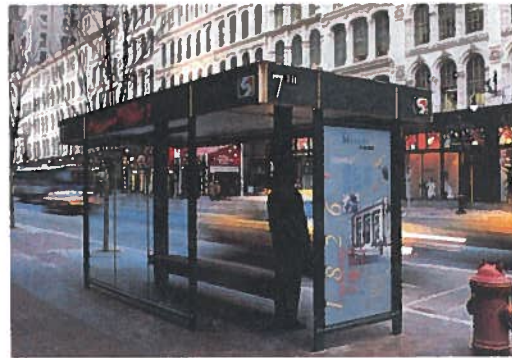
## Cincinnati success

In Cincinnati, one of the country's few cities with an official design department, city graphics cover all those bases. Designer Marsha Shortt helped create the department, which over 22 years has designed building signage, stalls and banners for a city-run outdoor market, departmental identities, and directional signs, as well as city publications.

A crisp logo helped Cincinnatians accept Stormwater Management, a new department that would mean more taxes, Shortt said. And a new sign program for an art deco airfield now serving corporate jets will help show the executives who use it that the city cares about their business. A system of parking signs now in the works will identify public and private garages at street level, helping frustrated drivers searching city streets for parking spots.

"If you can't prove that you have parking," Shortt said, "people will go to suburban shopping centers." Orlando, FL, city planners agree. Prominent new signs have brought their half-empty garages to full capacity.

Besides communicating a city's attractions and directing people efficiently, signs can do something less tangible but no less important. They can communicate a city's character. For those who scoff at the importance of visual character, designers and city planners point unanimously to one city: Paris. "Everyone in the world wants to go to Paris, because of the way it looks," Gehshan said. European sign programs, many of which are comprehensive, attractive, and geared to tourists finding their way on foot, are a model for many American designers now working on city programs.

A few cities are going beyond establishing a city look to capitalizing on that look. Just as corporations can merchandise their official logos, some cities are beginning to do the same. Michellene Griffin, spokesperson for Marina del Rey, CA-based designers Runyan Hinsche Associates, explained that Beverly Hills, CA, now receives a fee every time its sign is used commercially. "I think you'll see a lot more of that in the '90s," Griffin said. "The '80s was a decade of gentrification. The '90s will be licensing and making a profit off of that gentrification."

## Urban graphic challenges

While designers and groups like the International Downtown Association push signage as a low-cost investment that generates priceless longterm dividends, such programs are not simple to design. Every challenge common to private development rears up in a city program, but on a vast scale. And city programs pose a few unique problems as well. For designers new to urban graphics, the only schooling available is the school of hard knocks.

To begin with, any city project is astronomically larger than even the largest office park, hospital, or airport. Directing people means leading them through a tangle of streets, sometimes from state or federal highways. It means placing signs on a mixture of federal, state, county, city, and private property, which means understanding and complying with their disparate codes and filing systems.



Bus shelters for downtown Philadelphia. Designer: Cloud and Gehshan, Philadelphia. Fabricators: Pannier Graphics, Wasminster, PA, and Cummings Sign, Nashville.
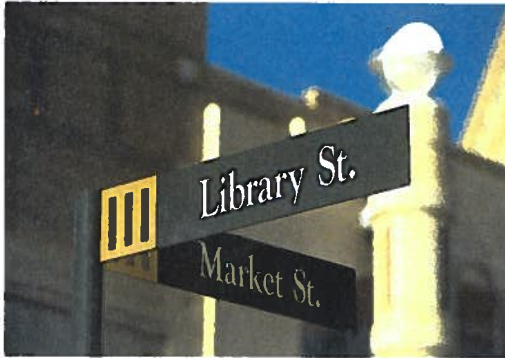
**Street signs in downtown Reston, VA. Designer: RTKL, Baltimore.**

A city sign system means more jurisdiction than any private project. City divisions, organizations, associations, and approval boards all have a say. For instance, a new sign program for downtown Denver, designed by the Denver office of Gensler and Associates Architects, was commissioned by the transportation and engineering divisions of the City and County of Denver, which acted as the project manager.

In addition to those divisions, Gensler reported to a committee from city planning. The Denver Partnership, a downtown development group, was part of the design team. The city's historic commission had to approve all designs, because the sign program ran through two historic districts. And the plans periodically came up for discussion at town meetings.

"It was interesting, to say the least," said David Baker, Gensler's project manager for the program. "We had more approval meetings for this than for any other project I've ever worked on."

More meetings mean a longer lead time. City projects can take three or four times longer than private projects, according to Andrews, requiring more follow-up than many design firms are used to. "In the private area, there's usually a boss who will make decisions in a timely way," he explained. "Publicly, these decisions are made according to the shifting winds of political priorities. There's a whole different sense of time. It can be disconcerting, but that's just part of the game."

### Political priorities

Projects paid for with public money can be voted in and out repeatedly, held off until a different fiscal year, or sacrificed to an election. And because they're paid for with public money, their budgets are usually inflexible — and tight.

Shortt reported that when Cincinnati's design department bids on city projects against outside firms, private firms are often three or four times more expensive. Private firms who know what they're getting into, she said, will mark up their fees to cover the increased time commitment, permits and permit research, and other work unique to city programs — work Shortt's department deals with every day.

The way public money is spent can mean maintenance problems, Shortt said, because often broken or worn signs spotted one year must wait until next year's budget to be fixed. They can also mean fabrication problems, because fabrication is set out for public bid, and the lowest bid always wins.

"Specifications must be explicit," said Jack Biesek, president of Blesek Design, San Luis Obispo, CA. "You can't sit down with three vendors to see who best understands the program, then pick one and negotiate price." And because the price awarded is the final price, designers don't have the luxury of changing or refining designs during fabrication.

### The future of urban graphics

Despite the challenges, city programs are steaming ahead, from the largest directional systems to the smallest banner programs. The most popular seminar at IDA's Orlando convention was a presentation on city signs around the world, according to designer Shaughnessy Hart, who gave it. "Cities large and small across the country are doing some wonderful things with signs and banners," IDA's Doyle said. "And they're getting cleverer by the day."

Signs can't solve the problem of our cities. They won't halt gang wars or house the homeless. They won't feed the one-quarter of the nation's children who live below the poverty level. A good sign program won't knock Detroit from its place as the nation's murder capitol, or stop riots in Los Angeles.

But signs can bring in essential tourist dollars, encourage new development and redevelopment of decaying neighborhoods, strengthen business, boost cultural attractions, and add to a city's visual appeal. Strong, vital cities will provide the solutions to our nation's ills. Those crucial solutions won't come from shopping malls, however nicely designed. ∎

# ■ University Center: Neighborhood Identity

One might think that a respectable group of university and hospital administrators choosing a neighborhood sign system would go with something, well, respectable. Designer Virginia Gehshan thought so.

"I guess we stereotyped them," she said. "We all assumed that they'd want a traditional program. Generally, universities love their traditions." When her firm, Philadelphia-based Cloud and Gehshan Associates, presented three design options for Baltimore's University Center neighborhood, the designers held little hope for their own favorite. Instead, the clients chose it immediately and unanimously.

It was an atypical reaction from a committee — but then, nothing was typical about University Center. The timeframe (tight), the budget (tight) and the client directive (strong) all seem more typical of private projects than public ones.

Several factors drove the project. A study commissioned by the University of Maryland Medical Systems had shown that few people considered its home area "a nice neighborhood." The nearby Inner Harbor festival marketplace and the new Camden Yards baseball stadium, also nearby, raised the graphic stakes. Maryland Governor William Donald Schaefer not only supported the program, he practically demanded it. And a state plan to push life sciences provided the sign program's literal twist.

Made of bent and painted aluminum, the signs recall the double helix of a DNA molecule: an interpretation, Gehshan explained, not a slavish imitation. Pedestrian directional signs rise up from concrete sidewalks in a seemingly fragile twist. Building identities pair two panels — a narrow, twisted sheet of metal beside a straight sign face. The same pairing repeats on 40 banners: a traditional printed banner on one side of each neighborhood light pole is matched, on the other side, by a narrow nylon strip like a twisted ribbon.

Though innovative, the sign program was hardly free of bureaucratic red tape. The designers had to consult with scores of people, and presented their work to two sign commissions, a banner commission, and the manager in charge of the city's light poles. A $200,000 budget covered fabrication (about half that amount) and design fees for Cloud & Gehshan, a landscape architecture firm, and a consulting engineer.

But the result, Gehshan said, achieved the administrators' objective to put the area on the map. Slated for redevelopment, University Center now has an identity of its own: Baltimore's "Neighborhood of Discovery." And visitors are finding that there's a lot to discover. ■
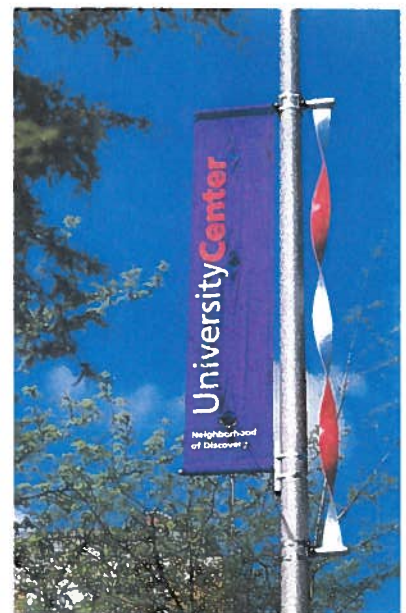
DESIGN: Cloud and Gehshan Associates, Philadelphia
FABRICATION: Nordquist Sign Co., Boulder, CO

1.

## Cloud and Gehshan Associates
## UNIVERSITY CENTER

### A new identity for a newly-named district

A 121 acre urban district in the heart of Baltimore that had always suffered from a lack of character was given a strong new identity with a system of exterior signs and environmental graphics ranging from a sidewalk paving pattern and construction fence to banners and a "life science achievement award trophy." A recurring aluminum spiral symbolizes the double helix of DNA, in reference to the district's many institutions dedicated to the life sciences. A large, complex group of constituents included the University of Maryland, University of Maryland Medical System, Veterans Administration Hospital and two residential neighborhoods.



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1. Presentation rendering.

2. Scale model showing family of sign types.

3. - 4. The banner program, showing an example of the decorative double helix inspired streamer.

5. Campus directional sign acts as street sculpture.

6. Automobile directional sign.

7. Address plaque. The cut out twist translates well at all sizes.

8. Typical campus building identification sign.

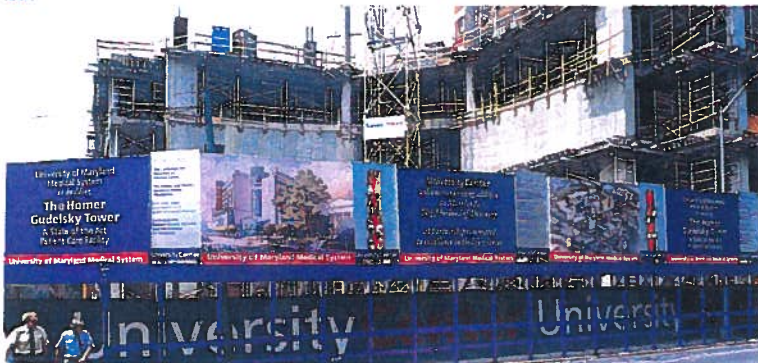9. - 10. Model and actual campus construction barricade.

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## Project Facts

The two year project involved three designers from Cloud and Gehshan Associates. A $200,000 design budget for the first of a two phase program included $100,000 from the University of Maryland and $100,000 from the University Medical System, a group of hospitals affiliated with the university. Doctors in district medical office buildings contributed an additional $16,000 for a banner program around their buildings.

## Technical Information

Designers specified aluminum with a non-directional sanded finish and anodizing. The bending of the twist in half-inch aluminum proved difficult to achieve; the metal tended to crimp where it was held. Letters were applied to the aluminum using a special weather resistant vinyl adhesive.

## Design Details

Designers were encouraged to use symbols and metaphors from the life sciences for the medically oriented "Neighborhood of Discovery." They were also asked to create a program with a "high-tech" look, which they interpreted to mean clean and contemporary. They presented three different concepts in model form; the client chose the least conservative. A Frutiger typeface, considered to have more personality than other sans serif faces such as Helvetica or Univers, supports the contemporary look. Signs also needed to be human in scale; pedestrian directionals were installed in sidewalks.

## Credits