

May 1998

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**PENNSYLVANIA
CONVENTION
CENTER**

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CONVENTION
CENTER



Architectural Signs

BY EDDIE WIEBER

Ride on the Reading

Designing a sign system for the Pennsylvania Convention Center.

Client: *The Pennsylvania Convention Center Authority*

Architects: *Thompson, Ventulett, Stainback & Associates, Atlanta, Ga.; the Vitetta Group, Philadelphia, Pa.*

Designers: *Cloud and Gehshan Associates Inc., Philadelphia, Pa.*

Sign Fabrication and Installation: *Andco Industries Corporation, Greensboro, N.C.*

AT THE END of the 19th century, railroads were the lifeblood of American enterprise. Goods from the factories and produce from the farms went to far away markets on an elaborate network of steel rails. People traveled daily to the cities and to vacation retreats on the weekends in comfortable passenger cars.

The railroads were a powerful symbol of the age.

By the 1880s competition between the different lines for control — and prestige — was fierce. Grandiose terminal buildings, with *head houses* that served as company offices, became statements of a railroad company's influence and power. The stakes were high. Fortunes were there to be made — and lost.

The Philadelphia & Reading, in a bold show of bravado, if not business acumen, opened one of these grand terminals in 1893. At 520 feet long, and with 13 tracks under a single-span arched roof, it was at the time one of the most impressive monuments to the train age. The Italian Renaissance façade of the head house was an eight-story Victorian extravaganza. Under the tracks at ground level was one of the largest farmer's markets in the world.

The Reading went into receivership a few years later, but for decades afterward

the terminal and market survived and were a Philadelphia landmark, always bustling with activity.

After World War II automobiles and jetliners took the lion's share of passenger traffic away from the railroads. By the 1970s the building showed the effects of years of neglect and its owners were again plagued with financial problems.

Nearly 91 years after the first train left the terminal building, the last train departed and the tracks were torn up.

The building itself may have succumbed to the wrecking ball, but instead was rescued by the Pennsylvania Convention Center Authority.

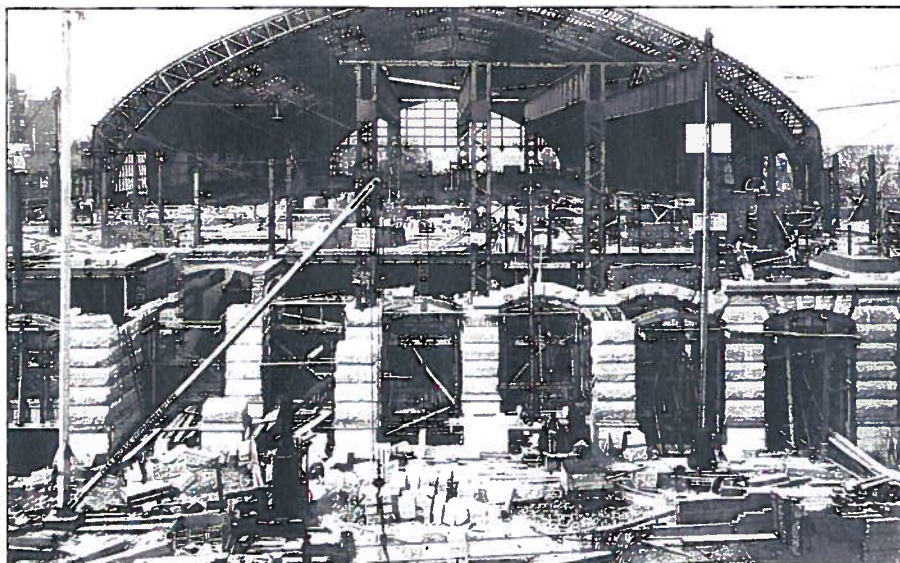
AN ARCHITECT'S-EYE VIEW

Philadelphia is a city rich in historical places. It was a fact not overlooked by planners who sought to stimulate the city's economy with a world class convention center — one that would celebrate the city's history and its architecture. The Reading terminal building had historical significance to the city of Philadelphia, and by the mid-1980s, it was the last of the grand railroad terminals still standing.

Jack Plaxco, of Thompson, Ventulett, Stainback & Associates, says it's this architectural heritage that gives the convention center its new architectural expression. The convention center is a sprawling 1.3 million square foot complex, 80 percent of which is the new exhibit building; the rest is the old Reading terminal and market. The center gets its design cues from the surrounding area.

"It was built to blend in with the rest of the city," he says, noting that it fits Philadelphia, but not necessarily Miami Beach or Salt Lake City.

Plaxco says the size and use of the



The Reading Terminal and Market in Philadelphia, under construction, circa 1892.

Photo by Brian Gassel/TVS&Assoc.



Photo by Brian Gassel/TVS&Assoc.



The Pennsylvania Convention Center is designed to fit in with the surrounding area.

Photo by Tom Crane.

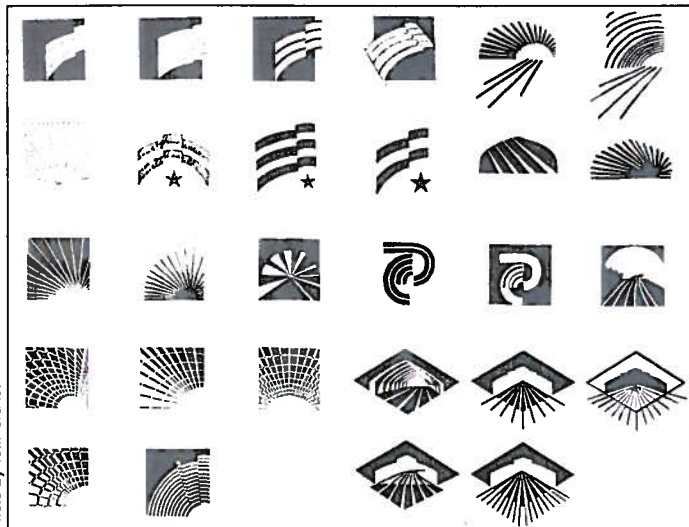


Photo by Brian Gassel/TVS&Assoc.



Six exterior pylons, clad with Green County granite, are located around the complex. The lettering is incised into the stone and then fit with stainless steel.

Photo by Tom Crane.



The convention center's identity logo evolved, as references to the train shed, tracks and the Reading's diamond logo were given different abstract treatments. The logo is featured on the exterior pylons, as well as on stationery, coffee cups and other memorabilia.

convention center is similar to a large airport, in that out-of-town visitors make up a large portion of the people who use the facility. For that reason, orientation and navigation are important aspects of the design.

TO MARKET, TO MARKET

The need for good wayfinding signs at the Pennsylvania Convention Center may

have been foreshadowed a century ago. Disoriented people often wound up in the waiting rooms and on the train platforms, looking for the market that was below. The problem was fixed with some hastily-painted signs directing shoppers to where they needed to go.

Plaxco says that's not the way it's approached now.

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Photo by Tom Crane.



Photo by Tom Crane.



The wayfinding signs are designed to complement architectural features. Vocabulary choices allow information to be revealed efficiently and in sequence, with regard to the fact that most people are just visiting. For convenience, the panels can be easily removed and replaced.

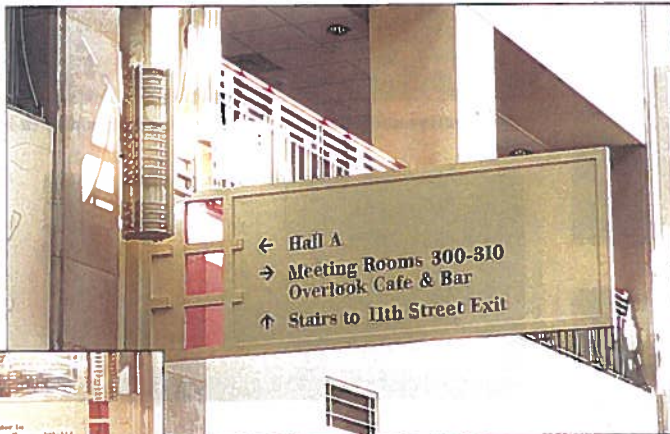


Photo by Tom Crane.

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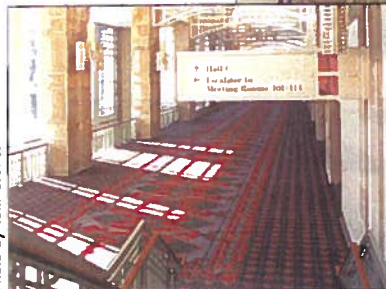


Photo by Tom Crane.



In the exhibit halls, restroom symbols and refreshment stand signs are placed high enough to be seen over tall exhibits. To minimize long walks across crowded convention floors only to find a refreshment stand closed, these signs are not readable when the internal lighting is turned off.



Photo by Tom Crane.



Photo by Tom Crane.

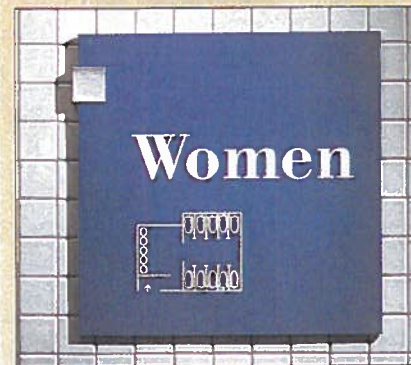
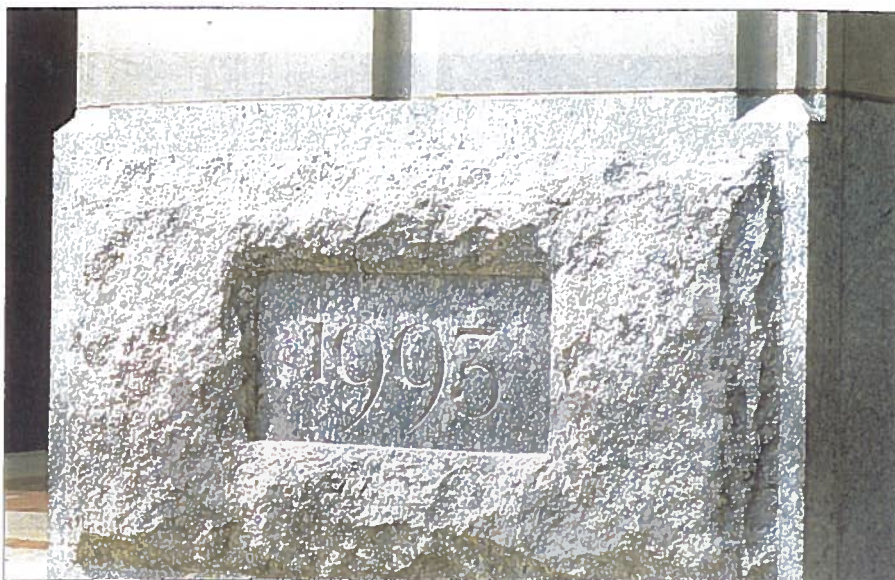


Photo by Tom Crane.



Photo by Tom Crane.

A secondary tier of signage, identifying restrooms, elevators and meeting rooms, brings information down to a more human scale.



The convention center cornerstone marks the second century of life for the Reading Terminal and Market.

"We tried to organize the plans to facilitate the movement of visitors," says Plaxco. "The signage system augments that. It's a critical part of the navigation and wayfinding program."

But functional wayfinding is not all the signage does. It also reinforces the architecture.

"The spaces are all fairly grand in scale," Plaxco says. "We looked for devices to break down that scale, to make it more intimate and feel more comfortable. The signage system offers opportunities for adding to the human scale, to use elements that repeat to bring a level of sophistication and refinement to the details."

SIGNS & LEVELS OF PERCEPTION

Jerome Cloud, of Cloud and Gehshan Associates, says there are multiple tiers of information in this kind of facility and each has to relate to the user and the building architecture. The first step in designing the system was to develop the nomenclature, or message system, then to put those messages in sequence.

"People are moving from the macro to the micro," says Cloud. "You don't want to give people more information than they need at any given point. Once you've established this hierarchy you can begin to determine the appropriate carrier for the message."

One tier of information is directional, carried by a series of cantilevered truss signs located throughout the public concourses. The design is influenced by the building's own truss support system that

spans the concourses high overhead. There are four different sized truss signs in the family.

Information flows from general to more specific as intersections are met and choices of destinations are offered via secondary concourses.

Other identification and informational signage has a more refined hotel or hospitality feeling.

"They're information," Cloud says, "but they're also more polished."

Special treatments such as arched fascias with light alcoves coupled with custom painted and polished letters, and special sign types for the café and refreshment stands, add a more elegant and welcoming feeling.

FROM PAPER TO REALITY

Frankie Perry, of Andco Industries says building signs for architectural projects places the sign company in a more active role, rather than just being a manufacturer.

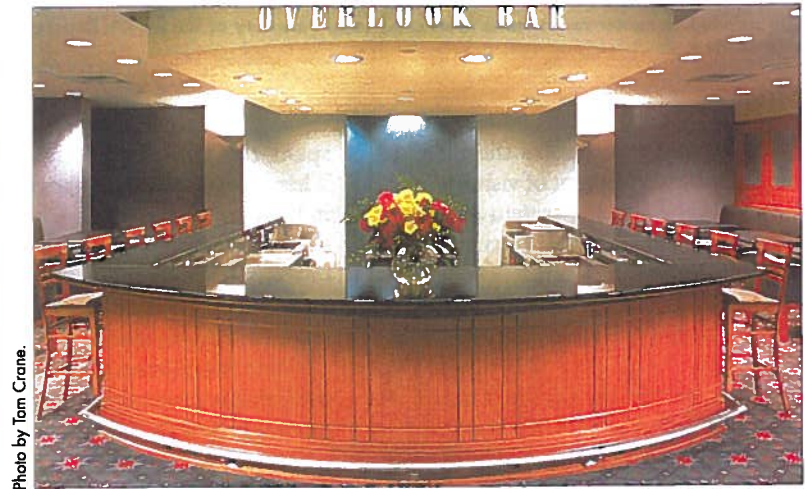
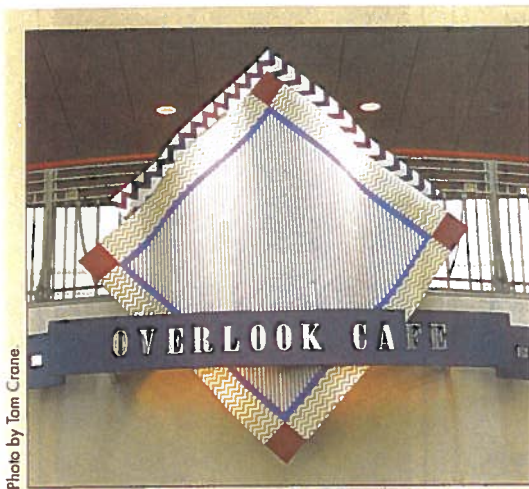
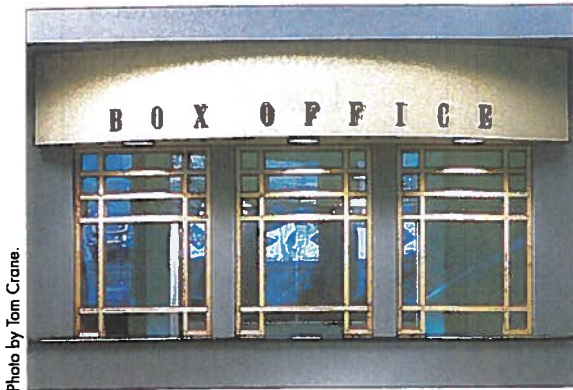
"The sign company becomes a contractor involved in design, engineering, R&D, installation and management," says Perry.

The result is the transformation of two-dimensional ideas into three-dimensional forms. The sign company's challenge is to find a way to create the actual object, giving form to the ideas. It involves making decisions about which materials to use, and fabrication, fastening and installation methods. Beyond that, a dedication to craftsmanship is essential.

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Architectural Signs

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At another tier, hospitality and accent signage bring the scale down to an inviting level, adding more sparkle and warmth.



The napkin motif signs and wall sconces for the Overlook Café add a touch of elegance to the area. The pieces are made of clear acrylic, screen printed and then heated just enough to allow them to bend without melting.

The napkin-motif signs at the café are a good example of this kind of challenge. The signs are clear acrylic in an elegantly curved napkin shape — part of the more polished, hospitality tier that Cloud refers to.

Perry says there's a procedure to this kind of fabrication that all the parties are bound to. It's a process involving R&D, models, submitting shop drawings and making recommendations resulting in a usable, effective and believable rendition of the idea that was drawn on paper.

"Once the solution is found, it seems very easy," says Perry. SB