

A Sign Sampler

Here are some examples (not all exemplary) of signs in cities, as a reference for discussion.

The black-and-white photographs by Nishan Bichajian are drawn from work commissioned by Kevin Lynch and Gyorgy Kepes at MIT in the 1950s and available at <http://dome.mit.edu/handle/1721.3/33655>.



Water St., Exeter, NH

A range of signs.

From the top down:

State highway directional sign.

Cast stone building identification above second-story windows.

Projecting sign for optometrist's office at second-floor sill.

Blade sign in the shape of a book.

At drug store, neon signs, projecting and flat; painted fascia sign; painted sign on glass; lighted perfume sign in window; painted and paper signs on door.

Parking regulation signs at curb.

Size

Signs should be big enough

so that the viewer, from some distance (and perhaps at some speed of travel) can identify the sign as a sign, and possibly as a sign of a given type, and receive the message on the sign (through shape, color, lettering).

Signs should not be too big

so that they do not obscure one another, obscure or confuse the cityscape, obstruct other functions (like seeing out of a building), or become structurally cumbersome or unsound.

On this page: billboards and billboard-sized signs from Cambridge and Boston.



Broadway, Cambridge, MA
Actual tree with virtual tree on billboard beyond



Broadway, Cambridge, MA
Apple Computer ad at Galileo Galilei Way



Main St., Kendall Square, Cambridge, MA
(photo by Nishan Bichajian / MIT Perceptual Form of the City series)



Vassar St., Cambridge, MA
(photo by Nishan Bichajian / MIT Perceptual Form of the City series)



Memorial Dr., Cambridge, MA
(photo by Nishan Bichajian / MIT Perceptual Form of the City series)



Cross St., North End, Boston, MA
(photo by Nishan Bichajian / MIT Perceptual Form of the City series)



Columbus Ave., Boston, MA
political posters
(photo by Nishan Bichajian / MIT Perceptual Form of the City series)

At right: building covered with political campaign posters. (Small multiples covering a large area.)



Times Sq, New York City, NY



Lovejoy Pl., Boston, MA
graffiti obscuring architectural elements



Boardman St., Cambridge, MA
Squirrel Brand candy factory: the sign panels ignore columns, but respect windows and spandrels.



Scollay Sq., Boston, MA
(photo by Nishan Bichajian / MIT Perceptual Form of the City series)



Boardwalk, Atlantic City, NJ

Signs as dominant, buildings as background. Signs of this size preclude transparency: no views in or out.



Cross St., North End, Boston, MA
(photo by Nishan Bichajian / MIT Perceptual Form of the City series)



Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, MA
signs in 2d and 3d story windows



Cambridge St. at Hanover St., Boston, MA
(photo by Nishan Bichajian / MIT Perceptual Form of the City series)

Signs at upper floors.



Binney St., Cambridge, MA
lighted mechanical penthouse as sign



JFK St., Cambridge, MA
painted building as sign

At left: Building as sign.



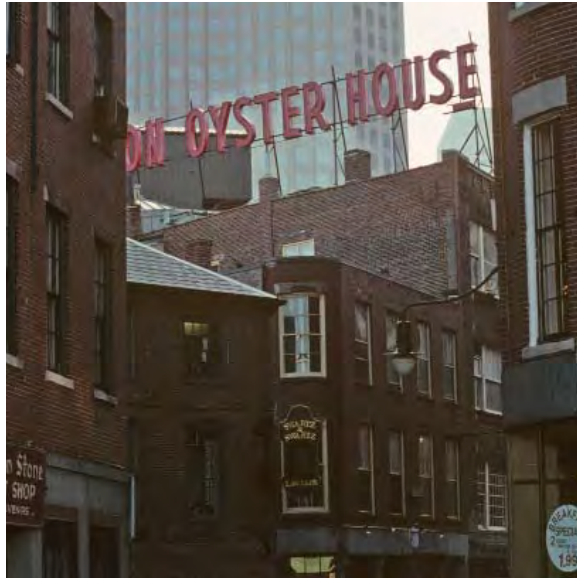
Sullivan Square, Boston, MA
Schrafft's candy factory



Vassar St., Cambridge, MA
Metropolitan Storage



Washington St., Boston, MA
Paramount Theater



Marshall St., Boston, MA
Union Oyster House

Above: Big signs, visible from some distance, ostensibly as landmarks and way-finding aids.

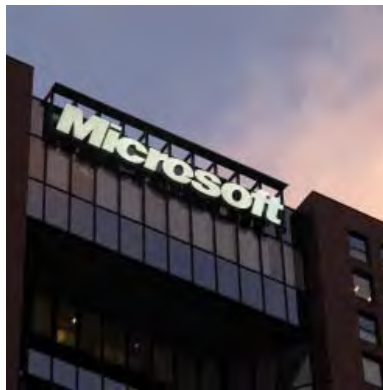
At right: Tiny identifying plaque on a landmark department store. The place is recognizable because of its architecture rather than its signage.



S. State St., Chicago, IL
Carson Pirie Scott store



Bishop St., Framingham, MA
Power plant, Dennison Mfg.



Kendall Square, Cambridge, MA

Corporate logos.



Main St., Cambridge, MA
 painted Vitrolite panel above entrance to the F&T Restaurant



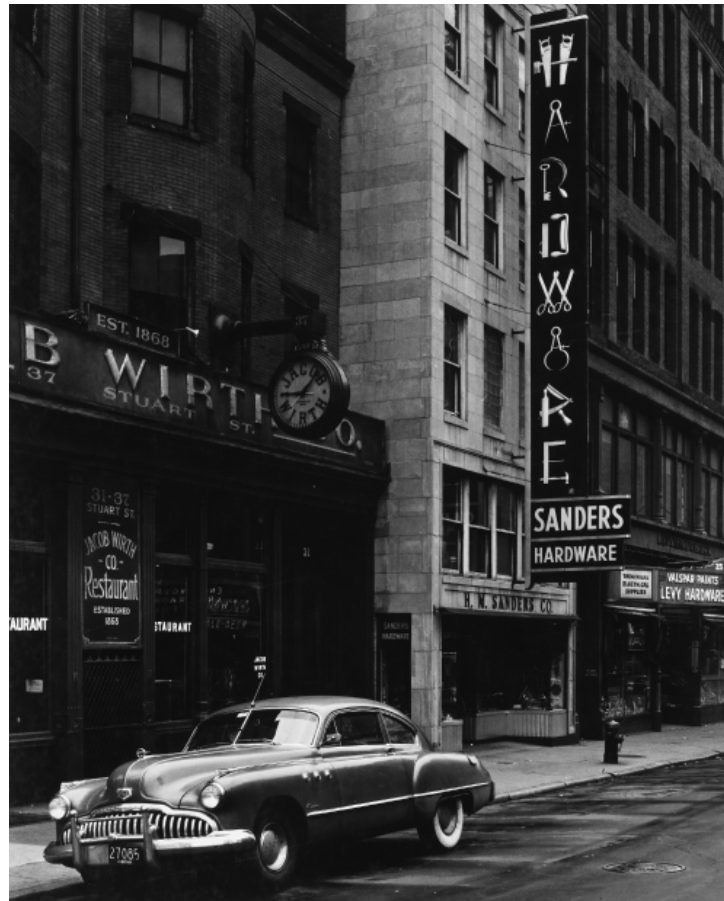
Main St., Kendall Sq., Cambridge, MA
 F&T Restaurant
 (photo by Nishan Bichajian / MIT Perceptual Form of the City series)

Form

Signs are sometimes the most carefully rendered details of a building.



Biological Labs, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA
 carved brick fauna (Katharine Ward Lane)



Stuart St., Boston, MA
 hardware store sign with tool font
 (photo by Nishan Bichajian / MIT Perceptual Form of the City series)

There's a long history of three-dimensional signs. These 3D "cartoons" have a cheerful directness, often rendering familiar objects at outlandish size, and offering information and amusement even to preschoolers.



Rt. 16, Mendon, MA
Willowbrook Restaurant



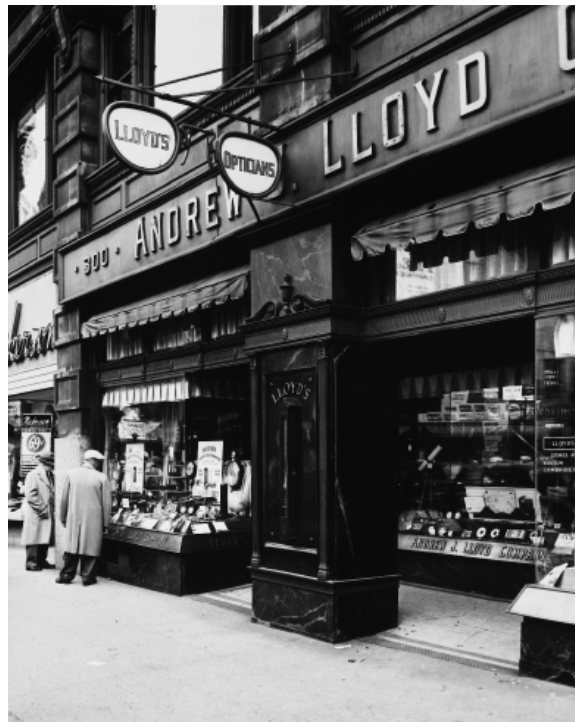
Temple St., Nashua, NH



Broad St., Boston, MA



Tremont St., Boston, MA
(photo by Nishan Bichajian / MIT Perceptual Form of the City series)



Washington St., Boston, MA
(photo by Nishan Bichajian / MIT Perceptual Form of the City series)



West St., Boston, MA
Rolling shutter housing = big pencil



Boylston St., Boston, MA
(photo by Nishan Bichajian / MIT Perceptual Form of the City series)



Hanover St., Boston, MA
Cigar store



Church St., Cambridge, MA
Lizzy's Ice Cream



Washington St., Boston, MA
(photo by Nishan Bichajian / MIT Perceptual Form of the City series)



Holyoke Center, Cambridge, MA

Location

With respect to the public way: on, overhanging, or simply visible from.

Height: as a function of viewing distance of users

Relationship to building elements: obstructing, casting light into windows; associated with entrances

Relationship to one another: obstructing, establishing a family of multiple similar objects

Particular use-associations, eg theater and hotel marquees.



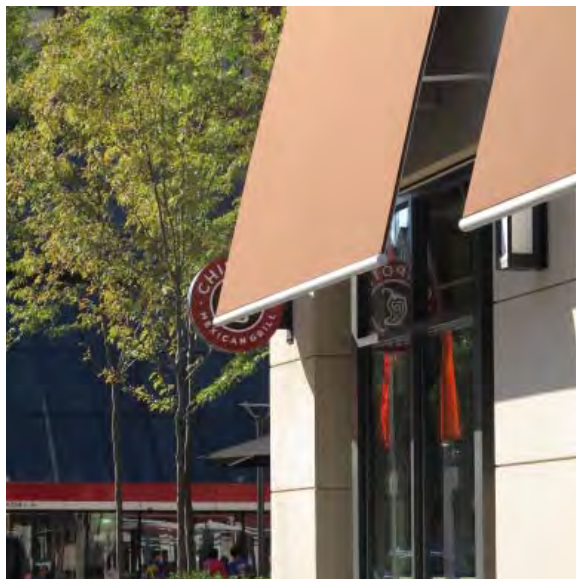
Málaga, Spain
(photo by Arthur Stern)



Rue D'Auteuil, Paris, France



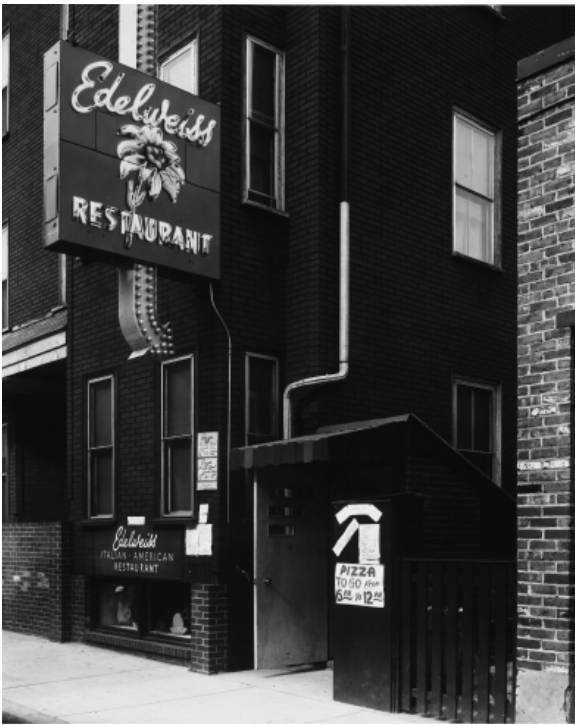
Main St., Cambridge, MA
Microsoft blade sign, T red line sign



Main St., Cambridge, MA
Chipotle blade sign obscured by awning



Main St., Cambridge, MA
Boston Private Bank blade sign obscured by awning



Green St., Central Square, Cambridge, MA
 (photo by Nishan Bichajian / MIT Perceptual Form of the City series)



Massachusetts Ave., Central Square, Cambridge, MA
 (photo by Nishan Bichajian / MIT Perceptual Form of the City series)



Boylston St., Boston, MA
 freestanding sign cabinet
 (photo by Nishan Bichajian / MIT Perceptual Form of the City series)



Massachusetts Ave., Central Square, Cambridge, MA
 (photo by Nishan Bichajian / MIT Perceptual Form of the City series)



State St., Newburyport, MA



Massachusetts Ave., Central Square, Cambridge, MA
 (photo by Nishan Bichajian / MIT Perceptual Form of the City series)



Broadway, Cambridge, MA
window as billboard



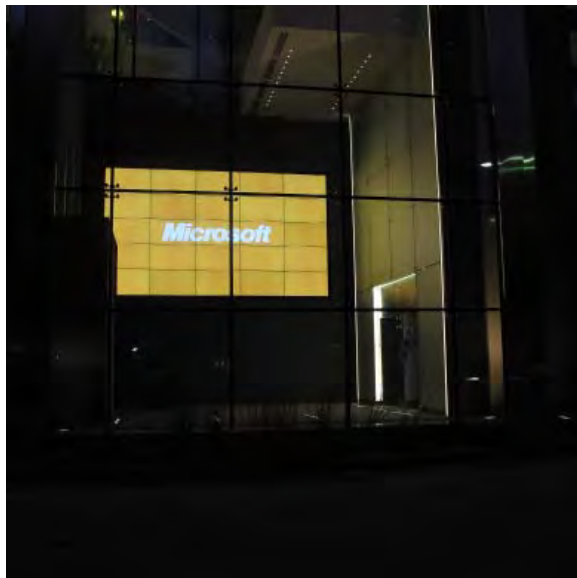
Portland & Main St., Cambridge, MA
7-11 windows obscured by frosting and signs



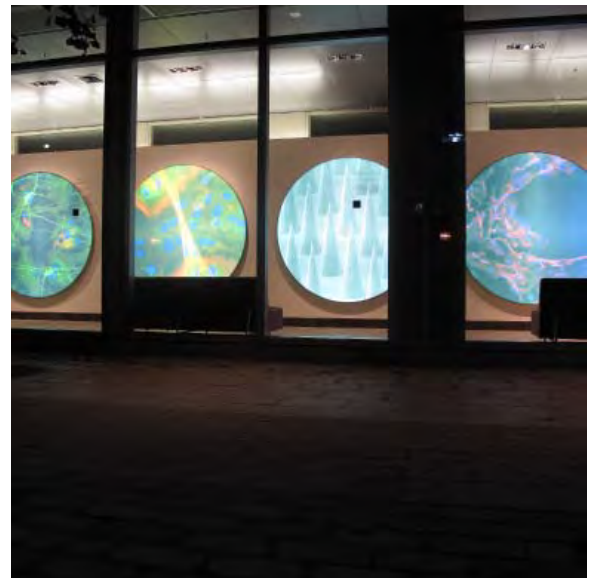
Chambers St., Boston, MA
(photo by Nishan Bichajian / MIT Perceptual Form of the City series)



DeLuca's Market, Charles St., Boston, MA
window displaying merchandise and interior, with neon and painted signs



Broadway, Cambridge, MA
flat panel display screens in Microsoft lobby

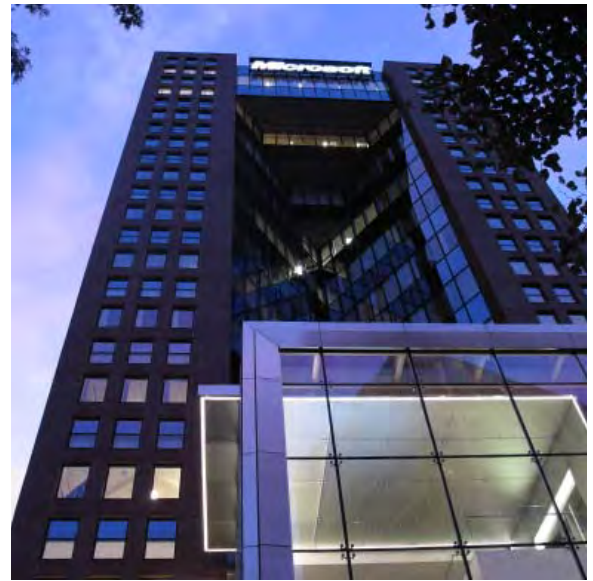


Koch Institute, MIT, Main St., Cambridge, MA
backlit photographs in lobby

Lights and action



Washington St., Boston, MA
Paramount Theater marquee



Kendall Sq., Cambridge, MA
One Cambridge Center



Langley Park Shopping Center, Langley Park, MD
theater marquee and light tower

Use

In addition to advertising, signs can identify, educate, amuse, and direct.



Washington St., Haverhill, MA
building name and date



Main St., Cambridge, MA



Boston Bricks, Winthrop La., Boston, MA
pavement inset "you are here" (Kate Burke & Gregg LeFevre)



Town Hall, Marktgasse, Bern, Switzerland
the mechanical clock that inspired Einstein



Albion, RI
bridge builder's identification plate



Weybosset St., Providence, RI
Westminster Arcade



238 Main St., Cambridge, MA
Kendall Square Building clock tower



Main St., Cambridge, MA
plaque commemorating the first phone call



Boylston St., Boston, MA
Freestanding clock establishes semi-public zone between sidewalk and storefront.
(photo by Nishan Bichajian / MIT Perceptual Form of the City series)



Rose Kennedy Greenway, Boston, MA



Hampshire St., Cambridge, MA
regulatory & informational signs



Albany St., Cambridge, MA



Purchase St., Boston, MA
highway signs at Central Artery ramp

Regulatory and wayfinding signs rely on uniform and predictable forms to set them apart from commercial signs and to identify them as members of functional groups (e.g., octagonal red “Stop” signs).

Examples at right show regulatory signs in need of improvement. Particularly egregious are the back-to-back signs identifying the traffic signal number: contrast with the discreet yellow adhesive label identifying the light standard on which the signal signs are hung. These signs are ubiquitous and numerous, and their collective presence does make a difference. They would benefit from better design.