ULTRA

Positions and Polarities Beyond Crisis

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Ultra Graphic: Australian Advertising Infrastructure from Morris Columns to Media Facades

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Abstract

This paper examines the development of infrastructures for outdoor advertising and debates over visual 'oversaturation' in the built environment. It begins with the boom in posters that came in the 19th century with a plethora of new manufactured goods and the attempts by civic officials to create structures that would extend cities' available surface area for the placement of ads. It then charts the rise of building-top 'sky signs,' articulated billboards, kiosks, and digital media facades while detailing the policy initiatives meant to regulate these ad surfaces. This work builds on ongoing research into the development of signage technologies in Sydney and Melbourne, the measurement and regulation of 'visual pollution', and the promotion of entertainment and nightlife in precincts defined by neon and historic signage.

This project responds to the increasing ambiguity between traditional advertising substrates and building exteriors. It charts the development of display technologies in relation to changing architectural practices and urban landscapes. Signage innovation in Australia has been driven by increasingly sophisticated construction practices and by the changing nature of cities; shifting markedly with increased automobility, migration and cultural change, and mobile phone use. The means by which urban reformers and architectural critics have sought to define, measure, and control new ad technologies—sometimes deemed 'visual pollution'— offers a prehistory to contemporary debates over 'smart city' street furniture, and a synecdoche to narratives of degradation and ugliness in the post-war built environment.

These four thematically linked episodes show how Australian civic officials and built environment activists have responded to visual clutter, and the fuzzy line between advertisers, architects, and builders erecting increasingly dynamic infrastructures for ad delivery. This progression shows the fluctuating place of advertisement in the built environment, ending with the emergence of today's programmable façades and urban screens.

When Hamilton John Goold-Adams, the Governor of Queensland, opened the first Australian Convention of Advertising Men, held in Brisbane in 1918, he admitted that he was just learning about the "importance of advertising at the present day," nonetheless, he was impressed by the contribution of the advertising industry to the war effort and in "building up industry" and "increasing prosperity." After these complimentary remarks he ended his speech with an admonishment, the organisers noting that "all he asked was that in advertising the beauty of the cities… they did not disfigure their hoardings or their buildings" and did not advertise "to people who did not wish to be advertised, and making known all their little failings, as was sometimes done in America."[1] With these words of warning the governor departed, leaving the 50 delegates to map the future of Australian advertising. Their vocation, they lamented, was woefully behind the United States, where "advertising… is the big cog in the business machine… a great big, live, pulsating business machine, with many cogs, wheels, shafts, pulleys, belts, dynamos and the like."[2] What was needed was "a suitable designation for men qualified in the advertising profession" perhaps, suggested one delegate, "advertect" which "carried with it a suggestion of building up like the word architect." This name was struck down, and the group failed to agree on a coinable term for their profession settling only on "ad men" which, according to Frank Bignold of Sydney, was "good enough for their glorious Allies over in the land of Stars and Stripes" and, therefore, good enough for those "under the Southern Cross."

1. Quoted in Australian Convention of Advertising Men & Queensland Institute of Advertising Men. 1918. *Proceedings and resolutions of the first Australian Convention of Advertising Men held at Brisbane, 2-6 September 1918:* 15-16. http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2819331233.

2. *Proceedings*, 50-51.

The back-and-frtoh at the convention illuminates both the insecurity of a new industry and its position in relation to the perceived dynamism of US ad culture, where ads fit into a complete, and highly commercialised, system for producing the built environment. The mustering of public opinion during the First World War through patriotic posters (often offered pro bono) had helped establish advertising as a profession, but the prestige boost was fleeting. The remarks of Queensland's governor helped reinforce the idea that advertisements could contribute to urban space by taking a step back, introducing fears of oversaturation. Moreover, advertising was seen by its early practitioners as distinctly non-architectural and aspirations towards the later were thought to be "high-falutin."[3]

3. *Proceedings*, 107.

Figure 1: A hoarding at the intersection of Wexford and Campbell Streets in Sydney's Surry Hills, 1906 (Demolition Books, City of Sydney Archive)

The idea that the city could become oversaturated with ads was not new. In early Victorian London the unregulated poster-sticking trade became a hot button issue when venerable buildings were covered by the 'disfigurative work' of paste bucket crews.[4] The failure of civic officials to control the city's surfaces was seen as indicative of greater lawlessness and decay in a society unspooled by industrialisation, displacement, and growing urban poverty. The poster-pasting free-for-all only began to shift in the 1870s with the establishment of privately managed hoardings (Fig. 01), an innovation that quickly made its way to Australia. The creation of these structures (however rudimentary) shifted the concept of advertising. Bills were no longer an appliqué to be stuck here and there, but a contributing force in the creation of space. Hoardings legitimised their presence on walls and shifted the perception of ads, taking them from 'blight' to 'burgeoning industry' as property owners looked to hoardings as a new way to monetise their land.

4. Henry Sampson, *A History of Advertising from Earliest Times* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1874), 23, accessible on the Internet Archive and Project Gutenberg.

For the Love of Litfaß

The trade of the 'ad man' was relatively new in early 20th century Australia, as were the substrates that carried ads. Hireable ad spaces on buildings' sides were much in demand as an unending stream of newly produced industrial products entered the market. Yet, the square-metres of the city surfaces on which hoardings could be placed were limited. The solution was to create more ad surfaces at street level.

The advertising pillar (called "Morris columns" in the UK and France, and "Litfaß columns" in German-speaking countries) was phenomenally successful in extending the ad-ready space in European capitals. Initially debuting in Paris, the innovation was brought to Berlin by printer and entrepreneur Ernst Litfaß, who received a concession from the Prussian government in 1854 to install multi-functional *litfaßsäule*. These early models were meant to be multifunctional pieces of street furniture where the poster-wrapped column would conceal a bubbler, tiny newsstand, or discreet urinal. In the end, very few of the Berlin ad-displays had second uses.[5]

5. Yet, in the urban imaginary their internal square footage did hide secrets. Famously, in *The Third Man*, Harry Lime escapes into the Viennese sewers through an ad column.

Ad columns did not arrive on Australian shores until relatively late in the 19th century. Promoted by the Postal Pillar & General Advertising Co, their arrival in Sydney was met with some consternation. Initially, the City Council objected to the pillars as "unsightly mediums" for (what was assumed to be crass) advertising. They only withdrew their objections with the stipulation that all advertisements would be personally approved by the mayor's office.[6] In a first for the city, the ads would subsidise beneficial infrastructure, in this case "200 combined postal, electric signal alarm, and telephone pillars," and this seems to have tipped the balance, outweighing the deleterious effects of advertising on the passing crowds.

6. New South Wales, *Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly*, 1890: 7-30.

Despite the perceived public gain from the pillars, just a handful dotted the streets of 1890s Sydney. The Postal Pillar Company, who managed them, wrote the Mayor's Office for approval every time they sought to switch out adverts (Fig. 02) and their presence irked some local councils who had them removed. Nonetheless, they set a precedent for the creation of new ad-bearing structures and the funding of footpath

7. Kenneth Slessor, "My Kings Cross," *Bread and Wine: Selected Prose* (Angus and Robertson, 1970): 60.

improvement through concessions. The pillars were often illuminated, and backlit ads were one of the main draws for higher-end firms seeking to promote their products. However their scale, well suited to the pedestrianism of 19th century, was too diminutive for the coming age of the streetcar and automobile. By the time the advertising men were assembling in Brisbane in 1918, bulb-lit sky signs were rising above major intersections, and, within a decade, they would be joined by neon: the red globes "of light, the liquor green/the pulsing arrows and the running fire"[7] of new nightlife districts.

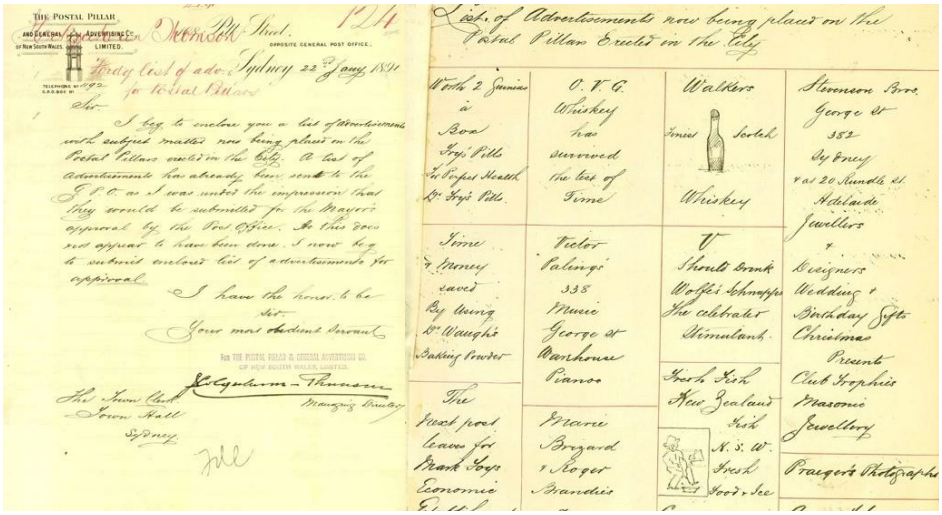

Figure 2: A letter and sketch (detail) of the layout for posters to appear on an advertising pillar opposite the Sydney General Post Office, submitted for approval to the Sydney Mayor's Office in January of 1891 (City of Sydney Archive)

The Sky Signs are Here

8. Quoted in Dietrich Neumann and Kermit Swiler Champa (eds) *Architecture of the Night: The Illuminated Building* (Munich: Prestel, 2002): 38.

While advertisers never claimed to be architects, many early 20th century architects and builders were, in fact, advertisers. The two professions freely mixed at the under-examined periphery: in industrial buildings and in vice districts. A late Victorian building that stood in front of the Cameron & Sutherland machinery yard in Sydney (Fig. 03) was typical of this hybridity, it had a street-wall-cum-billboard that was nearly double the height of the two-storey building behind it, anticipating the typographic style and visual heft of the sky signs that would come to dominate arterial roads in both nightlife precincts and light manufacturing areas. While rooftop-mounted signage was by no means loved, it was not seen as a blemish on otherwise 'pure' buildings. Rather, it put forward the notion that a simple industrial structure could serve as a giant logotype, not a pejorative in the rough-and-tumble commercial world of late-Victorian Australian cities, but an asset and testament to business acumen. The building-as-logotype shift did make many classically trained architects recoil in disgust, but modernists, like the Weimar architect Hugo Häring, welcomed the acceleration of ad culture as a sign that the end was near for the historicist facades they loathed. Häring noted, with more than a little approval, that, by the 1930s, commercial buildings were "merely scaffolding for advertising signs, lettering, and luminous panels."[8]

Figure 3: An early example of an industrial building as logotype, 65-67 Pyrmont Bridge Road photographed shortly before its demolition in 1919. (Demolition Books, City of Sydney Archive)

In the 1930s and 1940s the allusion to "scaffolding" was quite literal as "sky signs" were erected across many capital cities. These consisted of hollow letters bolted on a rooftop metal superstructure or, sometimes, dropped down over facades and even windows. They gained great popularity in urban centres even as they were banned in smaller towns (a move that put elected officials in conflict with entrepreneurs seeking to promote their products, sometimes on existing infrastructure "erected at great cost").[9] Sky signs, sometimes called 'skeleton letter signs' in the ad trade, became new landmarks. These signs were often fitted with neon, including three- and four-movement flashing designs. They changed the look and tempo of the skyline; working, as one trade publication put it, "all day every day…all the year, registering your product and your services in the consumers' minds."[10] Their visibility played into wayfinding, helping to both situate and overwhelm city dwellers (depending on their density). Sky signs addressed commuters emerging from train stations and positioned themselves on rooftops adjacent to new motorways, effectively hedging their bets on transportation forms (Fig. 04). While seen initially as indicative of coming urban dynamism, they were quickly recast as proof of commercial culture's excesses. Yet, they had their defenders, most notably the poet Kenneth Slessor who ended every stanza of his 1944 poem "William Street" (the epicentre of Australian outdoor advertising) with "You find this ugly, I find it lovely"—a rejoinder to the critique Robin Boyd would level 15 years later.[11]

9. "Too Many Bans and Restrictions," *Border Morning Mail* (Albury, NSW), 8 September 1949: 14.

10. The Outdoor Advertising Association of Australia, Inc. *Outdoor Advertising.* Melbourne, 1949: 13.

11. Slessor, "My Kings Cross," 60.

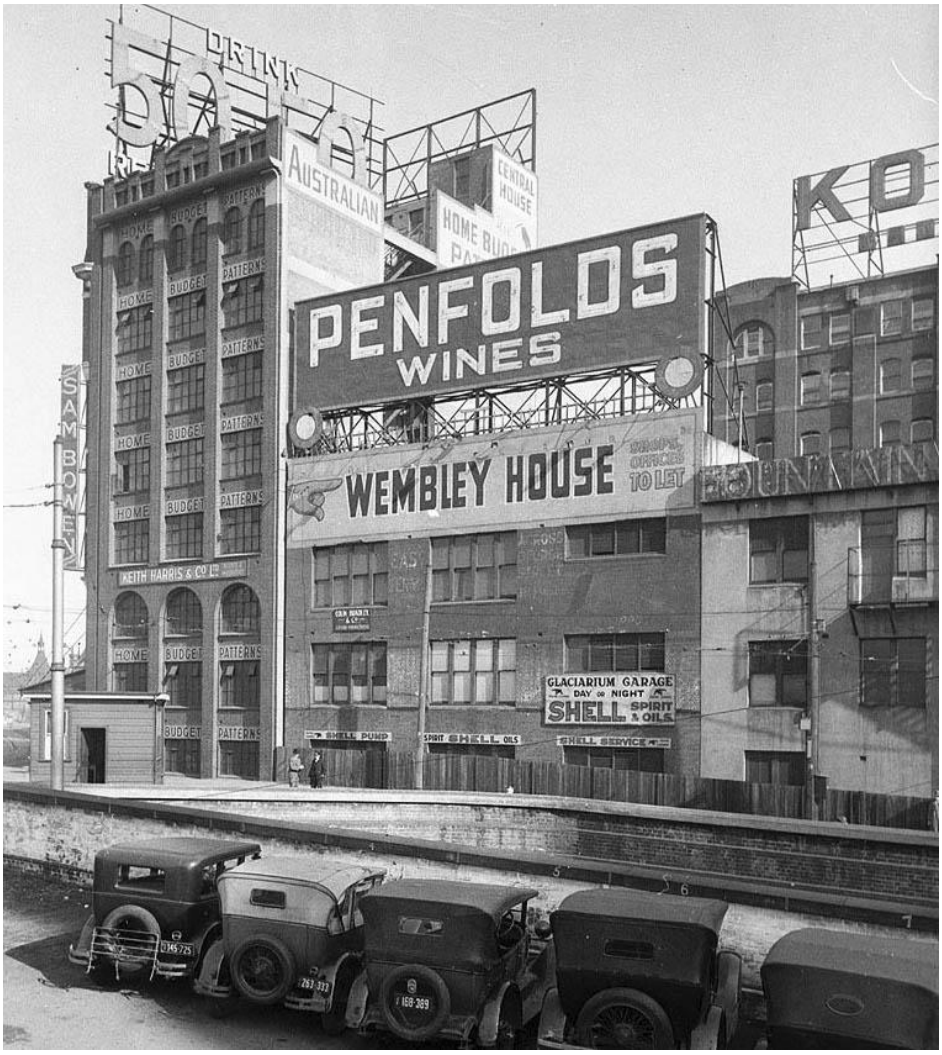

Figure 4: Sky signs on Little Regent Street, Sydney, 1934. (City of Sydney Archive)

Rage Against the Billboard

The expansion of car culture in the post-war era helped to further muddy the waters between advertisers and architects. Kiosks, extra-large billboard 'spectaculars,' polyurethane 'big things', and a variety of street furniture appeared by new suburban roadways. Critics like Robin Boyd and Donald Gazzard attacked the "decay of the visual environment" and the "disfigured landscape" of "hoardings and roadside advertisements."[12] Inspired by the UK Townscape movement[13] and progressive planners from the US, they lined up behind an idea of urban 'legibility' in the face of visual overstimulation and blight (two, sometimes contradictory, concepts that Boyd successfully united under the term ugliness). To Boyd, writing in *The Australian Ugliness*, visually-intruding objects combined to form an "ill-considered and uncoordinated assortment of posts, hydrants, bins… neons, placards, stickers, posters, slogans— all bundled together like an incompetently-rolled swag with loops and tangles of overhead wires."[14] The messiness of new roadside developments was not a temporary snag on the path to modern cities, but part and parcel of a degraded visual sphere. The critique of sloppy and 'chaotic' urban spaces speaks to a new holistic approach to visual perception and place. While ad structures of the past, like sky signs, maintained the figure-ground relationship of building and surrounds,

12. Donald Gazzard, ed., *Australian Outrage: The Decay of a Visual Environment* (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1966).

13. Mathew Aitchison, "Ugliness and Outrage The Australian Townscape" in *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 30, Open*, edited by Alexandra Brown and Andrew Leach (Gold Coast, Qld: SAHANZ, 2013), vol. 1, p 407-417.

14. Robin Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness* (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1960). 38-39.

the maximalist roadside advertising of the 1960s broke it open, blurring graphics with landscape.

Both Boyd and Gazzard specifically drew from an environmental understanding of the city to frame signage as both naturally occurring and as an element that must be held in check, lest it threaten native biodiversity. Creating a balanced ecosystem was key and this meant "conservation of our natural resources" that takes into account "our general environmental needs: recreational, scientific and visual." Custodianship of the environment (including the built environment) meant preservation to preserve "our visual inheritance" and to mitigate what is seen as a worsening "visual confusion."[15] Ad structures would be singled out for regulation and periodic culling as billboards popped up and hoardings climbed walls and building sides. The visual environment needed to be balanced, which meant removing the advantage that advertisers had gained.

15. Gazzard "Australian Outrage," 29, 15.

As early as the 1930s, there had already been, what a Western Australian ad man called, "misunderstandings between outdoor advertisers and town planners" that he hoped would not "turn into antagonism."[16] By 1964, when Gazzard's photos from "Australian Outrage" were shown in Sydney, the 'misunderstanding' had morphed into "an exhibition of spontaneous protest… attacking the casual way in which the appearance and quality of our surroundings are being debased." The book—with 'Outrage' rendered in blood-red san serif across the entire top half of the cover—would come out two years later and would help to extend the conversation to those outside of the circle of architects and urban designers who had come to the initial exhibition.

16. "Outdoor Advertising: Business Men's Address," *Daily News* (Perth, WA), 17 July 1930, 8.

Gazzard's issue with billboards was, in many ways, tied up with the new roadways they lined. The relationship between road projects and billboards, he fumed, was "parasitic" with ads "living off a public investment—the road—without rendering a valid public service in return." Despite this apparent antipathy, only ten of the book's 160 plates explicitly show ad-based 'blight', far more space is given over to cataloguing aboveground wires and poles, "the acne of the urban complexion", outmoded street furniture, and glaring environmental degradation in the form of unregulated dumping.[17] Just a few paragraphs into his critique of outdoor advertising and Gazzard seems to run out of steam, moderating his position, and allowing that "advertising can add vitality to certain areas" and should not be banned outright.[18] It's clear that the outrage that he brings forth is almost entirely reserved for roadside billboards and exurban signage. This is in contrast to Boyd's more idiosyncratic formulation of 'ugliness' that relies on certain taste cultural markers; his critique of the scale, colour, and ubiquity of new signage gives one the impression that it is not just the advertisements but the perception of who was putting it up—the new rich and the 'newly arrived'—that is at issue.

17. Gazzard "Australian Outrage," 12, 16, 122-28.

18. Gazzard "Australian Outrage," vi, 15.

The 1960s debates on 'ugliness' and 'outrage' helped to create a bifurcated framework for the evaluation of outdoor advertising that exists to this day: on one hand there is roadside 'clutter' that is deemed both garish and potentially-dangerous to passing motorists, and, on the other, there are spaces where high density advertising might help contribute to sense of vibrancy and life. The former is seen to be in need

of regulation (by Departments of Roads, planning authorities, councils, and others); while the later intersects more with architects, developers, and heritage specialists and, in some cases, is seen as a positive feature of cities that needs to be incubated.

How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Signs

The commercial detritus that 1960s critics, like Boyd, lamented—milk bar placards, big thing roadside sculptures, and exposed-channel neon letters—was both replaced by larger, sleeker signs in further-flung suburbs and reined in by anti-billboard ordinances. Ironically, it was the typographic assemblage of inner-suburb, mid-century signage that's become a marker of a certain kind of cool, excavated by a new generation of 'urbanists'. These 'scholars of the everyday' revolted against the perceived elitism embodied in Boyd's Euro-inflected modernism and learned to love the buzzing neon of old highways and chrome lettering. With copies of *Learning From Las Vegas* in hand they went hunting for first-generation roadside signage (already being replaced by newer modes of display) and, slowly, they infiltrated heritage alliances and planning ministries, directing funds (although never huge sums) towards the conservation of 'vernacular' advertising. In an increasingly televisual age, old signs spoke to a notion of 'urban authenticity' that was rapidly vanishing.

In Melbourne, the search for the vernacular is most clearly seen in the embrace of the Nylex Plastics sign. Erected in 1962, it was a latecomer to the sky sign era, its neon letters are topped with a new technology: a digital clock face that hangs over the Yarra River, serving as an informal entryway into the city's CBD. Its unlikely survival in a deindustrialising city turned it from an eyesore (nicknamed "Derham's Folly" after the moulded plastics baron who put it up)[19] to an icon. It is the star of Paul Kelly's 1987 music video "Leaps and Bounds," immortalized in the lyrics as "way up on high/The clock on the silo" that looks across the cityscape, embodying the unpolished chic for which Melbourne is known. In his 1982 book *Signs of Australia*, the artist and writer Richard Tipping notes that cities are now defined by the "visual and verbal traffic jam" of "roadsigns, billboards, street and place names, shopfronts, notices, graffiti, and the night's neon labels." This mix is not off-putting, but intoxicating, searching out the signs is, for Tipping, "addictive."[20]

While "visual pollution" along roadways was still very much an issue in the 1980s and 90s, a new crop of anti-billboard activists distinguished between highway 'litter-on-a-stick' and heritage sky signs, marquees, and hand-painted ads. Neon was earmarked for preservation efforts starting in the 1970s when cheaply made plastic signs packed with fluorescent tubing began to quickly replace it. Faced with the prospect of classic neon going dark, preservationists rallied to save what was left of it. The removal of Melbourne's Skipping Girl Vinegar Sign in the late 1960s caused an outcry, and it was reinstated in 1970. In 2007, it was placed on the National Trust's heritage list, and, in 2016, the organisation successfully lobbied to have the podium of an adjacent development pushed back to preserve the view of skipping "Little Audrey" for people headed out of the city along Victoria Street.[21]

19. Sally Stewart, "High achiever who never said never," *Sydney Morning Herald,* 26 September 2008, https://www.smh.com.au/national/high-achiever-who-never-said-never-20080925-4o4t.html.

20. Richard Tipping, *Signs of Australia* (Melbourne: Penguin Books, 1982), 7.

21. John Masanauskas, "Iconic View Saved," *Herald Sun* (Melbourne), 03 July 2016.

More recently, it was announced that the Nylex sign and some of the silos below it will be retained and renewed, as the anchor for a new mixed-use "lifestyle destination" called the Malt District. These changes signal not just an appreciation for old signage but the widespread realisation of the cultural capital, and potential for monetisation, contained in these structures.

Figure 5: An image of a revitalised Kings Cross with the Coca-Cola sign at its centre (Committee for Sydney).

The neon nightscape of Kings Cross much admired by Slessor in the 1940s has mostly been demolished, but what little remains has, along with a subsequent generation of 1960s neon, been preserved and celebrated. Much of this has happened within the context of neon as a stand-in for nightlife and vibrancy, where 'scene setting' lighting, inspired by Cyberpunk films like *Bladerunner*, helps fuel consumptive activities and "naughty but nice" placemaking. The Coca-Cola billboard, plopped down at the intersection of William Street and Darlinghurst Road in 1974 to replace an older generation of neon, has itself been replaced by a newer LED version (its original two- to five-metre-tall letters were chopped up and auctioned off on eBay for charity).[22] A recent study by the Committee for Sydney envisions the sign as the backdrop for a revitalised entertainment and theatre precinct.[23] This hub would anchor a proposed "neon grid" of nightlife venues around Sydney (Fig. 05). This, along with the recent appointment of a 24-hour Economy Commissioner, or 'Night Tsar', looks to Kings Cross as a model for new nightlife, and highlights the allure of commercial façades as a springboard for economic development in what is hoped will be a post-Covid bounce back for the hospitality sector.

22. Emily Blatchford, "The Famous Kings Cross Coke Sign Has Been All Chopped Up," *HuffPost Australia*, 30 August 2016, https://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/2016/08/29/the-famous-kings-cross-coke-sign-has-been-all-chopped-up_a_21461649/.

23. "A Vision for Kings Cross," Committee for Sydney, 23 April 2021, https://sydney.org.au/publications/a-vision-for-kings-cross/.

Architecture as Signage

In recent years, there has been an effort on the part of both architectural historians and media theorists to untangle the interwoven histories of advertising and architecture. In her critical reading of postmodern architecture, *Rethinking the French City: Architecture, Dwelling, and Display after 1968*, Monique Yaari asserts that the last 50 years have seen a shift towards architecture as signage, this came to the fore in postmodernism but extends into the screen-laden buildings and

24. Monique Yaari, *Rethinking the French City: Architecture, Dwelling, and Display after 1968* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), 372.

25. Craig Buckley, "Face and Screen: Toward a Genealogy of the Media Façade," Screen Genealogies: From Optical Device to Environmental Medium, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019) 74.

'monumental media' (Fig. 06) of the present day.[24] New buildings are increasingly pushed to have built-in display technologies to advertise their owners and tenants, offset operational cost with third party ads (in lifts, for example), and to allow for public-facing messaging (seemingly more important than ever with the Covid pandemic). As Craig Buckley observes in *Screen Genealogies: From Optical Device to Environmental Medium*, "a building's ability to display and control moving images, graphics, patterns, and text has become a requirement as important as its material, shape, weatherproofing, or security."[25] He goes on to note that the rise of the digital building-wrap is not evidence that architecture has been 'devoured by media' or advertising, but a recognition of the façade's complex role as a medium.

Figure 6: The first iteration of Melbourne's Federation Square Big Screen in 2008, ten years later it would be extended as a "media façade." (Creative Commons, Flickr user msnaut).

The recognition of building envelopes as advertising substrates has been a long time coming, anticipated, tacitly at least, by advertisers themselves who scrambled to secure space on façades and hoardings (structures that served as a façade adjuncts, often masking empty lots and industrial uses); eventually building-up street walls that served as proto billboards. Within the field of architecture, the recognition of advertising came first in the form of disgust and then winking admiration, especially for 'auteur' artist-architects like James Wines, of SITE, whose Best Products stores in the US became a cult hit in design circles. While Wines updated the folly for the suburban big box store, buildings in the urban core took on the sign technologies of the Las Vegas strip, often as part of a process of 'festivalisation' written about by critical geographers like Neil Smith and David Harvey.

The creation of marketplaces and going-out districts was seen as an "Aladdin's lamp for cities fallen on hard times."[26] Signage, particularly historicised neon and globe lighting, became a way to 'activate' space, especially in cities shifting away from industrial production to service entertainment economies. The overstimulation fretted about so much in mid-century texts critiques was seen as a positive: visual stimulation could ramp up the whole metabolism of a city, creating 'destinations' and adding 'energy' to shopping precincts. In the push and pull between advertising structure and architecture the scale has jumped from walls, to street furniture, to facades, to megastructures. While advertisers dared not play architect, architects have no scruples about moonlighting as advertisers.

26. Quoted in David Harvey, "From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism," *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography 71*, no. 1 (1989): 13.