

Ghost Signs

Mark Spurgeon's mission is to document historical signage before it is wiped out.



Even as a child I thought there was something magical about old buildings, they sparked my imagination of a bygone era and what it might have been like. I remember in Wellington, where I grew up, seeing large warehouses with old painted advertisements along their sides, there seemed to be certain charm about them. These signs - with hand-crafted typeset words accompanied occasionally by an illustration - were created by skilled craftsmen.



Still now I'm fascinated by these signs of the past, and about four years ago I started a visual record - photographing not just old buildings but, specifically, the buildings with hand painted signage or adverts that have lasted the test of time. These are sometimes referred to as 'ghost signs', 'brick ads' and also 'fading ads'.

It wasn't a conscious decision to start this project. I was visiting Sydney when I purposely photographed my first sign, and the only reason I noticed it was that it was directly at eye level, instructing passersby to beware of the traffic. When I saw it I recognised the craft, depth and care that had gone into this artwork, the textured surface, chipped, weathered and scraped look somehow added to its appeal. For me this started a journey of looking for more of these hidden but visible artworks.

After a few years shooting, mostly in New Zealand and Australia, I started to look for an outlet for the collection I had amassed. Whenever I showed anyone my latest shots they were enthusiastic and would often point me in the direction of some 'new' old sign that I hadn't photographed, or tell me of towns that I needed to visit. As in many cases, the internet is the easiest place to display a project to the public - and as such preserve.co.nz was launched in early 2009. Much to my delight, Preserve was posted on many design-related websites and still continues to be.

Preserve's aim is to produce a permanent photographic record of hand painted building signage in New Zealand before these treasures from our past are erased from our cityscapes. Many of these signs are either being built out (covered by adjoining buildings), worn away by weather over time, covered (as buildings are being resurfaced), or disappearing as buildings are demolished. The Preserve collection, while mostly New Zealand signage, also features some images from other countries which people contribute via email.

Adding content to Preserve was easy at first, but after I had found most of the obvious signs the hunt became more difficult. I found that most were usually high up and not easily seen, or down alleyways



The sign that started it all for graphic designer Mark Spurgeon - a simple beware of traffic sign on a Sydney wall was the first to be purposefully documented. Other Sydney signs included Radio 2KY,

below. Signs, such as the painted car, ERG Batteries sign, the green sign from Farmers Temuka, overleaf, came from his home town of Christchurch or small towns around the country.



behind the main centres of newer high street shopping areas. I looked in the older parts of towns where things are a little more run down and the owners of the buildings hadn't bothered to repaint or look after their buildings. It was in these places that I found many classic ads and signs. Some cities I've been to seem to have completely erased their signage heritage through constant repainting and modernisation. I was in Nelson recently, and looked forward to a few hours walking around adding to the Preserve archive. My expectations of finding some 'new' signs were high given Nelson's heritage, but sadly there was next to nothing to be found. The signs were lost, hidden, I suspect, under the coats of paint on the many fine buildings. While I understand this is necessary to protect the buildings, I often wonder how we can keep our signage heritage protected in its original place of creation. I also wonder if buildings with historical or iconic artworks can have preservation orders placed on them - these are part of our New Zealand heritage.

Some developers have recognised the importance of what is written on the walls of the buildings they are working with, and to a certain extent work around them when buildings are repainted, repaired or updated. Whether they were thinking the walls looked good as they were or wanted to keep them for historical reasons I do not know but there does

seem to be an appreciation in some renovated places.

A nice example is in His Lordships Lane, Christchurch where part of the original wall signage has been worked around and left for people entering to see.

I like to think that Preserve is capturing a snapshot of a fast-disappearing craft which is more like an art form in itself. This is a great shame for those who admire this lost typographic skill. Often seen at the bottom of some signs are the signatures of the sign writer or company that created the sign, which shows they were proud of their art. I have tried to research some of these names through the internet but have yet to find anything significant about the companies and men that made these historical artworks.

Although there are many of these urban artworks around us, they are largely unseen and when they are pointed out people do appreciate them, as part of our heritage, and part of our past. Recently a national archive has been created in the UK for advertising: The History of Advertising Trust (hataads.org.uk) and part of the archive is specifically dedicated to ghost signs.

Perhaps it is time New Zealand had it's own heritage in advertising preserved for future generations as well.

Mark Spurgeon worked at Strategy as a senior graphic designer for nine years. He recently started Studio Publica, based in Christchurch. Links: preserve.co.nz; publica.co.nz; @typemark (twitter)



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