

American Signs: Form and Meaning on Route 66

Lisa Mahar

(NY, NY: The Monacelli Press, Inc, 2003)

Color photos, black and white photos, black and white diagrams,
272 pp., \$40.00 softcover

Reviewed by Douglas Towne

I'm weary of Route 66. It seemed just a personal quirk until *American Heritage Magazine* recently named the "Mother Road" the most over-rated highway.

Let me explain. It's not Route 66 itself I'm tired of. Cruising on Central Avenue in Albuquerque at sundown or checking into the Wigwam Motel in Holbrook are two of the most sublime joys available to retro highway connoisseurs.

No, it's the oodles of Route 66 kitsch and Kmart's Route 66 clothing line that annoys me. It's when you explain to a new acquaintance your fascination with commercial archaeology and they manage to immediately pigeonhole you, replying with a dismissive, "Oh, you're into that Route 66 stuff". Certainly the highway's popularity has an incalculable positive impact on the many topics that interest SCA membership; however, a much-revered edge is lost going mainstream.

It is with this aforementioned bias that I read a recent publication by Lisa Mahar, who may be familiar to readers from her previous award-winning book, *Grain Elevators* (Princeton Architectural Press, 1993). Her new offering, ***American Signs: Form and Meaning on Route 66***, focuses on another overlooked beacon--motel signs. She terms them, "a significant, and often misunderstood, idiosyncratic American icon". Whether she selected Route 66 as her petri dish for the fame attached to the highway or for the plethora of motels found alongside it is irrelevant. Mahar has composed, in my opinion, a landmark work in our genre.

A visual tour de force, *American Signs* combines contemporary and historical photography, meticulous diagrams and clearly written text to examine the evolution of motel signs along Route 66. The publication thrives on this synergistic connection since, as Mahar notes, "Books about form that rely primarily on text make it difficult for the reader to visualize the subject, and photographic surveys often lack thoughtful analysis."

For her project, Mahar selected Route 66's paving and bypassing as temporal bookends. The book covers five distinct sign periods: *Symmetry, Geometry, Rigor: 1938-1947, Theming and Regional Symbolism: 1945-1960, Abstraction and Self-Expression: 1950-1957, Specialization, Modularity, Segregation: 1957-1965* and *Intensive Simplicity: 1961-1970s*. Particularly interesting is the latter period, a transitional era from a regional to national aesthetic that's often-overlooked in print because of its minimal charm but whose story is nonetheless compelling.

Sign forms, materials, typography, colors, symbols, names, placement--and the forces that brought each into use--are documented, revealing broad cultural themes for each period. The book is brimming with nearly 500 photographs, most taken by the author. Some are dramatic, full-color photos; others often serve a more utilitarian purpose as components of the 168 diagrams that propel the reader whenever a snapshot or words aren't adequate. Diagrams clearly illustrate topics (forms of the roadside star symbol) or articulate complex concepts (analyzing how various signs appear to motorists cruising at different speeds). A striking effect is achieved on the diagrams, and throughout the book, by use of a brilliant red hue to highlight the black and white printing.

Even with these impressive visual aids, it's often the text that leaves the most lasting impression. The author's wit shines through when she refers to the signs constructed in the 1970s as "culturally inert", a simple--but staggeringly accurate term--worth a thousand pictures. The phrase will undoubtedly elicit a chuckle every time I pass yet another nondescript "Budget Motel" with a dreary plastic sign.

Like an effective roadside advertisement, the book works on several levels. At its most basic, *American Signs* is an entertaining trip down America's most famous highway. Its strong visual element entices examination from those with even a casual interest. But *American Signs* shouldn't be considered merely an attractive book to be perused and set aside on the coffee table.

No, Mahar aims higher and hits her target. Publications in our nascent field are often steeped in enthusiasm but fall short on insight. *American Signs* is like a film you instinctively enjoy but need to view repeatedly to fully comprehend. The book's sharp design may initially conceal its wealth of information. In the introduction, the author declares her challenging research intentions:

"(*American Signs*) is an analysis of the complex processes by which these signs were created, from conception to placement along the highway. And it is an examination of how and why motel signs have changed over time and what those changes tell us about the people who made and used them. Careful attention to signs made during those years...provides insight into changes not only in the signs themselves but also in patterns of transportation, work, and leisure and in regional and national traditions and economies."

Some elaborate concepts are put forth in the book; however, most ideas are digestible without too much work. For example, of interest to SCA members researching segregation topics is the discussion of Colonial and antiquity elements such as Chippendale borders, lanterns, servants, shields, and crowns as popularized on signs in the 1960s. The author hypothesizes that they did not so much emphasize service but exclusivity and wealth, and were used primarily to reinforce longstanding divisions of class and race.

Armed with *American Signs*, the often-cacophonous roadside can produce a surprising harmony. While focusing on Route 66, many concepts can be applied to your local strip. The book provides a much-needed foundation for those initially attracted by sign aesthetics, thereby enabling them to more fully appreciate the roadsides they covet, photograph and research. Instead of simply documenting the charm of roadside advertisements, it aids in understanding the genesis and evolution of that beauty. As co-founder of the New York architecture and design firm MAP, Mahar possesses the sophisticated tools needed for an examination of this magnitude.

For enthusiasts wanting to make that leap from mere appreciation to understanding the roadside in a larger context, *American Signs* is an excellent--and perhaps necessary--guide. Previously, I admired the breathtaking signs and neon vistas having only a rudimentary comprehension of what gave them life and form. Now I'm much better equipped to decipher the forces that created the roadside we admire. And this makes travel oh so much more interesting....

Douglas Towne is book review editor of the *SCA Journal*. Living in Phoenix, Arizona, he considers the stretch of Highway 80/89 through Tucson--not Route 66--the most fascinating expanse of roadway in the state. He relishes the roadside, and its cyberspace equivalent, for the serendipitous meetings that so often occur there.