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Pittsburgh Signs Project: 250 Signs of Western Pennsylvania

by [Chris Potter](#)

Pittsburgh Signs Project: 250 Signs of Western Pennsylvania

Carnegie Mellon University Press, 203 pp., \$29.95

I grew up in an affluent but sterile Pittsburgh suburb -- one I got out of whenever I could. And it was easy to tell when I'd succeeded: Suddenly, signs would be everywhere. Instead of confining themselves to strip malls, they would start crowding the streets the closer I got to town. Whatever else they might be about, signs advertised the fact that you were someplace where things were happening -- even if the brands they touted had disappeared decades before.

Obviously, the contributors at the Pittsburgh Sign Project feel the same way. Since 2003, the Project has operated a Web site (www.pittsburghsigns.org) where volunteers have uploaded photographs of signs from all over Southwestern Pennsylvania. And now, *almost* in time for the holiday season, the Project has published a book featuring 260 of those images. (On sale at the Carnegie Museum of Art and other cultural institutions, the book can be ordered at bookstore.web.cmu.edu.)

Obviously, *Pittsburgh Signs* may cause bouts of Rick Sebakian nostalgia for what is no longer there. (Brace yourself for the heartache of seeing the entrance to Chiodo's Bar again.) But you'll also have the pleasure of recognizing signs you walk by every day, and realizing how much a part of the landscape they really are.

But with images culled from 14 counties, it won't all be familiar. You may ponder the strange circumstances that led Hank's restaurant to offer frozen custard *and* Mexican food. You might speculate about why a surgical-supply store would advertise in neon -- or why *anyone* would name their business "Lick N Putt."

Some of these signs are badly faded, or were ugly to start with. But they are neatly presented here, with excellent reproduction and crisp layout ... right down to an index that provides the longitude and latitude of each sign, in case you want to hunt them down with a GPS unit. The images are arranged, somewhat loosely, into a number of themes: Here's a collection of motel signs; here are a group of signs featuring large animal sculptures. There's a conceptual-art feel to that approach, though I'm not

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sure how much we gain from it: In the real world, signs connect in accidental, sometimes ironic, juxtapositions. If I were editing the book, I'd have used that fact as an excuse to pair off the sign for "His & Her Hobbies" with the advertisement for an adult-video store.

It's no accident, however, that one of the four *Sign* editors, Greg Langel, hails from Las Vegas. Flipping through the images, you get a feel for how signs, as much as shade trees or public fountains, can become an organic part of the landscape. (Sometimes literally: In one photo, a tree is growing over a parking sign, absorbing it into its bark.)

Conversely, *Pittsburgh Signs* completely ignores some of our most prominent signs -- like the skyscraper-mounted logos of UPMC and Mellon Bank. Jen Barron, a contributor and editor, says that's because almost nobody bothered to photograph those signs in the first place. Almost all the signs photographed, she says, "are about the human scale," right down to misspellings and faulty uses of the apostrophe.

And with one exception -- the Bayer *nee* Alcoa sign atop Mount Washington -- you probably won't lament the absence of the giant corporate nameplates. None of these banners are appealing, perhaps because they aren't trying to appeal to *us*. As Barron puts it, such ads "are meant to say 'Mellon owns this!' They aren't trying to be art." They aren't even trying to sell us anything: They're just staking a claim on skyline, and on our consciousness, without promising anything in return.

The images in *Pittsburgh Signs*, fortunately, offer a much better bargain.

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