

What is a Ghost Sign?

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Introduction

'Ghost sign' is a term used by the public, journalists, academics, and those with a professional interest in historic signage; it is evocative and poetic, but imprecise. This lack of specificity has resulted in misinterpretations and confusion as to what a ghost sign is.

While definitions of 'ghost signs' do exist, they are inconsistent and originate from those with an advanced interest in the topic, ignoring interpretations from the wider public. However, neither 'expert' nor 'amateur' definitions are grounded in a generally agreed frame of reference, with associated terms and descriptions; what Buckland refers to as "assigned subject descriptors" (2012 p. 154). This makes meaningful discussion challenging and prone to misunderstanding.

This chapter attempts to develop a frame of reference with associated terms by examining published material, alongside interpretations from the wider public—the latter has been accessed through the authors' ongoing interactions at regular lectures, walking tours, and on social media. These analyses then shape the development of a terminology, which is broadly divided into the 'form' and 'function' of signs, providing a basis for future discussion and debate.

The discussion is situated within the Western cultural context of the authors' own engagement with the topic. While some consideration is given to equivalent works in the French language, we have not referenced other cultural contexts and their implications for understanding and interpreting the term 'ghost sign.'

Origins of the Term

Walls is the first known book devoted almost entirely to painted signs fading on walls (von Schaewen 1977), followed by *Les Murs Réclames*, (The Wall Advertisements) (Ulmer and Plaichinger 1986). In 1989 William Stage published *Ghost Signs: Brick Wall Signs in America*, the earliest use of the term 'ghost sign' to describe any form of historic signage.

Stage recalls his publisher, Tod Swormstedt at *Signs of the Times*, provided the phrase, "Up until then I think I called them wall signs" (Stage, personal communication, 16 August 2015).

Swormstedt comments, "Not sure I can take credit for it. I just don't remember" (personal communication, 23 August 2015). The origins of the phrase, therefore, remain unresolved.

However, given the apparent primacy of Stage's work, it is here that any answer to the question 'What is a Ghost Sign?' must begin:

Ghost signs are the most interesting of all wall signs. Faded to the point of illegibility, they linger on old buildings, echoing the robust commerce of times past. Ghost signs become highlighted under certain conditions, such as the rosy glow of sunrise or sunset, or in the first minutes of a rain. (Stage 1989, p. 71)

Stage acknowledges that many examples in his book deviate from this definition, but that they will all "eventually fade into apparitions" (Stage 1989, p. 71), thus highlighting the problem of using the *level* of fadedness as the defining characteristic of ghost signs. While classifying a sign

as faded is relatively simple, quantifying the extent of that fading is much more subjective, although attempts have been made (for example, Wong 2013¹).

Despite this ambiguity, Stage's book maintains a tight focus on commercial signage painted on brick walls. This is to the (intentional) exclusion of other forms such as signs on barns, stuccoed walls, or glass. For Stage, ghost signs are a distinct subset of the wider realm of painted wall signs which, in turn, is a subset of other forms of painted and non-painted signage. His definition is limited, almost excessively so, leaving it to others to broaden its scope and reinterpret its meaning.

Evolution of the Term and Alternative Interpretations

Since Stage's seminal book, the term 'ghost signs' has been widely appropriated. Some offer definitions that follow directly from Stage's work (Thomas 2007, Miller 2010), others refer to the wider realm of fading wall signs, rather than Stage's narrower subset (Roberts and Groes 2007, Bunford and Bunford 2012, Spurgeon 2012, Jones 2015). However, in many cases there is notable deviation from Stage's original and subsequent explorations of the topic. To deconstruct the meaning of the term, it is necessary to consider its two components ('ghost' and 'sign') separately.

The Meaning of 'Ghost'

The Society for Commercial Archaeology (cited in Moratti 2011) provides two requirements that a painted sign must fulfil to qualify as a 'ghost' sign: first it must be more than 50 years old, second it advertises a product that is now obsolete. O'Toole (2012) and Russell (2006) borrow the essence of this definition, which introduces two aspects not mentioned by Stage: age and redundancy.

Defining ghost signs by their age alone is problematic because of the difficulty in dating them.² While it appears to offer a clear discriminating criterion, in practice it has limited scope in determining the signs that are (and are not) ghost signs in any meaningful way.

The redundancy of the product advertised is a more fruitful realm to explore. Banham references the "shadow[s] of a former time – of lost companies, products and services" (2011, p. 225). Hart includes only signs for businesses that have closed or moved away (personal communication, 14 August 2015) and Buchanan (2012) follows a similar approach, although admits that some material in his book advertises going concerns. There is a notion of cessation and/or abandonment within these conceptions and the 'ghost' is the remains of what once was, conveying something of the past in the present.

However, this approach is problematic if considering signs as objects for it requires external, contextual information before ruling whether or not a sign is a 'ghost.' It precludes an immediate assessment and instead necessitates reference to the business and/or product represented by the sign.

¹ A five-point scale with qualitative descriptors ranging from "Appears new" to "Nearly non-existent" (Wong 2013, pp. 2-8)

² Research by the authors has found 'brackets' (for example, between 1924 and 1928) rather than specific dates of production as most achievable when dating old signs.

An implication of definitions based on age and obsolescence is that they can include additional types of signs. While Cianci and Schutt (2014) avoid the arbitrary measure of a sign's age, they do broaden Stage's definition to include signs painted on other surfaces, including shop fascias. Villagomez (2015) goes even further to include non-painted forms such as signs made from neon and ceramic tiles. In doing so she appropriates the current Wikipedia definition³ which maintains the requirement for the sign to be on a building.

These more liberal, inclusive, definitions of a ghost sign could, in theory, include all forms of abandoned signage. Bunford and Bunford (2012) and Hart (2014) adopt this approach, featuring forms outside the scope of Stage's narrow definition. These interpretations of 'ghost' draw from the historic nature of the signage, independent of their production or current appearance. The signs are no longer treated purely as objects, but are situated within a wider set of historical and commercial contexts.

O'Toole (2012) adopts a visual interpretation, reflecting Stage's (2013) categorical split between those that are so faded they can hardly be seen, and those that have been revealed by the demolition of an adjacent building, or removal of a covering billboard. However, in Stage's reference to these 'revealed' signs, he considers them to be a subset of wall signs, related to, but distinct, from ghost signs. O'Toole (2012) argues for a more inclusive view, equating the sudden appearance of a sign with the shock of seeing a ghost. This is a theme picked up by Banham who refers to them as "Uncoverings" (2011, p. 203).

In these definitions based on the faded appearance of signs and/or their sudden exposure, much is borrowed from specific cultural interpretations of the visual and behavioural properties of 'actual' ghosts. However, as a definition they lack substance because of the variety of views on ghosts and what, if anything, they look like and do. While these notions of ghosts may have contributed to early conceptions of the term ghost sign, their lack of precision is now a hindrance to the process of providing clarity to discussions of its meaning.

'Ghost' is an ambiguous term, open to interpretation, and there are two schools of thought concerning how it is used in the context of signs. The first more or less adheres to Stage's original definition, emphasising the appearance (and appearing) of the signs as 'ghostly' forms. This faded, translucent aspect is characteristic of outdoor painted signs and is most readily applied to this group. Within this school of thought there is then a division between those who accept any form of fading painted signage, versus those who limit their scope to brick walls, or just signs that have "faded to the point of illegibility" (Stage 1989, p. 71).

The second school derives its definition from the symbolic and historic nature of the businesses advertised. In this sense the signs, and the words they contain, are relaying names and slogans that were not meant for our contemporary eyes. Their purpose is no longer being served and, in one way or another, they have been abandoned. With this interpretation, fading painted signs are a subset of the wider realm of 'ghost' signs, expanding the term beyond Stage's (1989) own restrictive definition.

In an attempt to reconcile these two schools of thought, Roberts posits that "the signs speak to us from the past and appear in a form that is less than their original full-bodied glory" (2013, p. 11). This approach introduces a degree of exclusivity, broadening Stage's scope while pulling

³ "A ghost sign is an old hand-painted advertising sign that has been preserved on a building for an extended period of time. The sign may be kept for its nostalgic appeal, or simply indifference by the owner" (Wikipedia 2015).

back from the wider-reaching definitions adopted by others. The faded, translucent appearance suggested does not necessarily limit the term to painted forms but excludes much of the material—for example neon and mosaics—embraced by the more liberal interpretations discussed. There remains a degree of ambiguity when attempting to qualify whether signs “speak to us from the past.”

Within this discussion the identified discriminating criteria can be divided into those that can be applied objectively and those requiring interpretation. ‘Faded’ is a technical binary term, whereas the level of this fadedness is open to interpretation. Some of the theoretically objective descriptors, such as age or trading status, present challenges when applied in specific contexts, arising from the need to access additional data beyond that available when considering the signs as objects. Similarly, contextual information is needed to determine if a sign is an ‘uncovering’.

The Meaning of ‘Sign’

While customarily aligned to advertising, ‘ghost signs’ may also provide direction, instruction, or be political and artistic pieces. This wider realm of signage is partially embraced in the History of Advertising Trust Ghostsigns Archive⁴ which, while dominated by signs for businesses large and small, also includes redundant directional signs to bomb shelters (for example, Cole 2006, Mulley 2009). Similarly Bunford and Bunford (2012) and Cox (2014) include examples for the Salvation Army, public transport services, and even an artistic mural, alongside primarily commercial signs.

The term ‘sign’ is also open to interpretation, however, there is already one legal precedent. A large protest mural in St. Louis was deemed exempt from restrictions imposed by the city’s sign code due to it being “a work of art expressing a sentiment” and so “not strictly a sign *per se*, in that it is not selling something” (Stage 2013, p. 69). These divisions can become increasingly subtle. Banham poses the question “Art or billboard?” (2011, p. 169) with reference to the large mosaic on the front of Melbourne’s Newspaper House. While this was an artistic commission, the strategic placement of a copy of *The Herald* newspaper also endows it with a secondary commercial role.

The many possible interpretations of ‘sign’ can be considerably broadened or narrowed. ‘Ghost sign’ can therefore encompass all types of signage, regardless of its purpose, or be focused on a specific subset such as commercial signs. These classifications of ‘signs’ are easy to define objectively and while there are grey areas, such as Melbourne’s Newspaper House, the reason for a sign’s existence is more apparent than its supposed ‘ghostly’ features.

Alternative Terminology

Stage’s notions of ‘wall’ and ‘ghost’ signs serve as a starting point for examining other terms used to describe the same phenomenon of fading signs on walls. These include, among others: “brickads” (Roberts 2007), “painted ads” (Stage & Stage 2010), “mural advertisements” (Swormstedt 2011), and “fading ads” (Jump 2011). Less ambiguous than ‘ghost signs’, these terms adopt a fundamentally descriptive approach, with ‘fading ads’ gaining the most widespread use and acceptance.

⁴ This photographic archive is available at <http://www.hatads.org.uk/ads/ghostsigns.aspx>.

Frank Jump's Fading Ad Campaign started in 1997, when he admitted that the term 'ghost sign' was alien to him (Jump 2011) and he has since largely rejected the phrase. 'Ghost' is evocative of the dead, contrary to Jump's use of the signs as "metaphors for survival" (Jump 2011, p. 47), examples of things living beyond "their expected life span" (Jump 2011, p. 27). Banham echoes this sentiment with reference to a Melbourne painted wall sign, where "instead of the Mazda Cat fading away from the cityscape, it may just be going through one of its many lives" (2011, p. 225).

Jump's 2011 book, *Fading Ads of New York City*, was the first in a series published by The History Press.⁵ With the exception of two volumes using 'ghost signs' in the title (Bunford and Bunford 2012, Hart 2014), these publications have all adopted Jump's 'fading ads' terminology. Further, the three American books have also adhered to Stage and Jump's narrow focus on painted signs fading on brick walls (Buchanan 2012, O'Toole 2012, Stage 2013), with only one minor exception.⁶

Although called *Fading Ads of Philadelphia*, O'Toole's (2012) work began as the *Ghost Sign Project* (2015) and it appears requirements for editorial consistency led to his adoption of the 'fading ads' terminology. Similarly Cox (2014) and West (2014) both use 'fading ads' in their titles about London and Gloucester respectively. However, both include many examples of non-painted historic signage amongst the examples painted on walls and shop fascias. In this respect they adopt a more liberal approach, similar to that of Villagomez (2015). However, they do so under the guise of the more specifically descriptive title of 'fading ads' as opposed to Bunford and Bunford (2012) and Hart (2014) who exploit the interpretive flexibility offered by using 'ghost signs'.

An additional term is "urban fossils" (Thompson 2006). As with 'ghost signs' this takes a metaphorical approach, fitting well with the term 'commercial archaeologist' used to describe those who seek such 'fossils.' Smith evokes a similar sentiment, referring to the "fossil remains from an earlier era of advertising" (2010, p. 1). Thompson (2006) and Smith (2011) both focus specifically on painted wall signs, aligning closely with Stage's (1989) original work.

The range of terminology indicates an area of study that is relatively new and clear linguistic boundaries have yet to evolve in order to describe the various phenomena under consideration. Whereas 'ghost sign' is ambiguous and subjective, these more literal terms and phrases offer clarity because they describe their subjects. However, this clarity is frequently hindered by inconsistent and conflicting application and a failure to accurately align the words with what they are describing.

Other Languages

While this chapter is primarily concerned with English language publications, there is also relevant literature in French. These authors adopt mainly descriptive phrases to identify their subject matter, which is dominated by painted signs fading on walls, such as *Les Murs Réclames*

⁵ See: Buchanan 2012 (USA); Bunford & Bunford 2012 (UK); O'Toole 2012 (USA); Stage 2013 (USA); Cox 2014 (UK); Hart 2014 (Ireland); West 2014 (UK).

⁶ O'Toole includes one non-painted sign because "the sign and its history are just too interesting" (2012, p. 67).

(Ulmer and Plaichinger 1986).⁷ These books are similar in content to some of the French ‘ghost sign’ blogs, although these stray into more poetic forms, invoking the ideas of speech and voices found in some of the previous discussion, for example, *Les Murs Peints Parlent* (The Painted Walls Speak) (Caillé 2015).⁸

Marc Combiér provides some insight into his terms of reference when comparing two of his books. The first, *Anciennes Publicité Murals* (Old Wall Advertisements) (Combiér 2006), deals with old painted wall advertising, typically faded in appearance. The second, *Typos en Liberté* (Typography Set Free) (Combiér and Mérou 2007), features a more eclectic body of material, embracing a wide range of signage and lettering, with painted wall signs separated from shop fascias, and non-commercial material given equal prominence to ‘pure’ advertising. However, the title of this second book permits a more inclusive approach, and shows Combiér’s awareness of some of the key differentiators within the material he investigates.

While these examples from the French literature do not have any direct use of ‘ghost’ or ‘ghost sign’ in their terminology, there is clearly a genre centred on fading painted wall signs. This aligns with the work of Stage (1989) and many of those who have followed him and, in this context, the term ‘ghost sign’ could be applied to their subject matter, should it be deemed linguistically and culturally appropriate.

Public Opinion

There is a wide involvement in the topic by members of the public, particularly through sharing images and research via social media channels. A search on Twitter for either #ghostsign or #ghostsigns⁹ will predominantly reveal fading wall signs, but also examples that fit within broader definitions such as that offered by Villagomez (2015).

‘Ghost sign’ is not a specific, descriptive term like Jump’s (2011) “fading ad” but it is often used by the popular press due to its evocative nature (for example, Liston 2013). This has contributed to a wide range of public opinion and a lack of clarity over what it means. A regular topic of discussion on the Ghostsigns Walking Tour¹⁰ is what signs should and should not be included on the route. This often provokes debate among those members of the public participating, including the full diversity of views found within the previous analysis of ‘expert’ interpretations.

To reach a definition two differing approaches can be adopted: the first considers what has already been published on ‘ghost signs’, the second is to ‘crowdsource’ a definition. Between

⁷ Other examples include; *Anciennes Publicité Murals* (Old Wall Advertisements) (Combiér 2006); *De la Pub Plein les Murs: Peintures Murales et Enseignes Commerciales* (Walls Covered with Advertising: Painted Murals and Business Signs) (Collet et al 2010); *Sur les murs d'un Montréal qui s'efface* (On the Fading Walls of Montréal) (Bougé and Niquette 2012).

⁸Other examples include: *Les Murs Peints Murmurent* (The Painted Walls Whisper) (Les Murs Peints Murmurent 2009); *Les Murs Peints s’Affichent* (The Painted Walls Announce Themselves) (Célérier 2015); *La Peinture à l’Ancienne* (Traditional [Sign] Painting) (La Peinture à l’Ancienne 2015).

⁹ <https://twitter.com/search?q=%23ghostsign&src=typd> and <https://twitter.com/search?q=%23ghostsigns&src=typd>

¹⁰ The tour is led by one of the authors, with over 500 guests having participated in the two years to November 2015. See <http://www.ghostsigns.co.uk/tours>.

these, a mixture of methods could be used to ensure that any definition both reflects public understanding of the term, while meeting the needs of those working on the topic in a professional capacity. No such study has been undertaken but, should one go ahead, it would need to establish clear terms of reference to enable consistent gathering and analysis of data.

Form and Function

Given the wide range of possible and suggested definitions for ‘ghost sign’ it is necessary to determine what differentiates them to provide a platform for analysis and comparison that can be used to critique the relative merits of each approach.

In considering these differentiating aspects, they have been divided into two categories: ‘function’ and ‘form.’ This is akin to Baines and Dixon’s “function and execution” (2003, p. 8) with the addition of a number of subsidiary considerations of particular relevance to ghost signs. In this broadening of the scope offered by Baines and Dixon (2003) aspects relating to the current appearance of specific signs is perhaps the most significant addition.

Function

Function is concerned with the purpose of a sign, specifically its communicative intent. Baines and Dixon provide a categorical split between those “signing the way” and those that are “naming places and defining spaces” (Baines and Dixon 2003, p. 8), while acknowledging that there is often overlap. This segmentation means that commercial signage only occupies a small portion of the material that they subject to analysis. There is therefore a wide range of communicative intent for any given sign, including one or more of the following:

- Commercial (for example, advertising)
- Directional (road signs)
- Instructional (no parking signs)
- Naming (building name)
- Political (protest graffiti)
- Artistic (community mural)
- ‘Faux’ (created for film)

While this list is not exhaustive,¹¹ it shows the diversity of functions that signs can perform. Each function operates as a top level category within a potential hierarchy—for example ‘Naming Buildings’ and ‘Naming Roads’ as sub-categories of the overarching ‘Naming’ category. Combinations of these functions also exist. A shop sign with an arrow pointing to the location of the shop is both commercial and directional. A building name can also be an advertisement—for example, London’s OXO Tower—and thus both commercial and naming.

The extent to which political and artistic creations can be considered as signs is debatable. Political material forms the basis of an entire volume dedicated to the fading remains of Fascist mottoes painted on walls in Italy (Segàla 2001), with Clough (2015) also featuring them, alongside fading commercial signs, due to the similarities in their appearance. An additional ‘artistic’ category is also included to account for the category of ‘faux’ ghost signs. These are signs created for decorative purposes, or on sets for film, television or theatre. They are distinct

¹¹ Kinnear includes a number of additional functions, including: “Celebration”; “Admonition”; “Commemoration”; “Mystification” (1980, p. 8).

from signs produced to appear old and faded, but which are, in terms of function, commercial, that is, advertising a new or existing business.

With respect to these functions, signs can be divided into those that still perform their original purpose (active) and those where it has become redundant (passive). To highlight this distinction, a relatively new shop sign could be 'passive' if the business has recently closed, whereas a fading fascia could be 'active' if the business is still trading. Clearly this active/passive distinction is in constant flux, as changes occur to businesses (for example, location, trading status), buildings and places. This distinction is external to the content of the sign itself and requires contextual information beyond the sign as object.

The realm of 'ghost signs' can be broadened or narrowed considerably when including or excluding one or more of these possible functions. Many authors have adopted a tight focus on just those that serve a purely commercial function (Stage 1989, Roberts 2013, Hart 2014, Villagomez 2015). Others have extended this scope into areas beyond business and commerce (Bunford and Bunford 2012, Cox 2014).

Any coherent definition of the term 'ghost sign' must therefore account for function and should also state whether the active/passive distinction is recognised and, if so, which are and are not included. The 'form' of the signs will determine the second part of the definition, similarly including and excluding specific instances through discriminating criteria.

Form

While the communicative intent of a sign resides primarily in its literal content, the form also has an influence on the message conveyed (Kinnear 1980). The manner of this presentation—for example the selection of lettering style—allows it to “convey an impression” (Gray 1960, p. 39) that can, and should, support its message. Form is therefore concerned with the physical characteristics of a sign, especially the means by which it was produced, and its current appearance. These characteristics stem from the following areas:

- Materials used (for example, paint, neon, glass)
- Processes used (carving, gilding, enamelling)
- Skills used (professional versus amateur)
- Underlying surface/substrate (brick, wood, plaster)
- Location (building, sign post)
- Style (letterforms, symbols, illustrations)
- Appearance (level of fadedness, palimpsest¹²)
- Completeness (lost letters)

Many of these features are accounted for by Baines and Dixon (2003), however, the last two extend the scope of their work to consider not just the execution of the sign at the time of production, but also its current state and appearance. The faded appearance of some signs is of central importance in many conceptions of ghost signs, and hence its inclusion is essential as a discriminating criterion.

The form of a sign can be misleading, as is the case with two further types of 'faux' ghost signs. The first are those that are originally painted to appear faded. This illusion means that they

¹² Palimpsest is used to describe the layering of letters on many (over) painted signs. This occurs when the most recent (top) layer begins to fade, allowing older (lower) layers to become visible simultaneously.

aren't faded due to the effects of weathering over time, but assessing this requires external contextual information. The second type are those that were once faded, but which have since been repainted, either partially or fully. In this case the form has been altered to make the sign appear as new, or to suggest that its function is once again 'active'. 'Faux' ghost signs present a dilemma if attempting to classify ghost signs on sight, without reference to contextual information, due to their (deliberately) misleading nature.

The form of a sign should also account for when it was produced, relative to its location. Architectural lettering, designed and created within the context of a building's original construction, differs from signage added at a later date (Gray 1960, Baines and Dixon 2003). This division could be referred to using the terms 'original' versus 'additional' signage and, as a relative term, requires no reference to the age of a sign. There is also a middle ground consisting of space conceived for signage before the precise nature of that signage is determined, for example shop fascia boards (Baines and Dixon 2003).

Considering the form of signs in this way facilitates the inclusion and exclusion of specific forms as 'ghost signs.' This can be done through conscious choices, with accompanying justifications, to clarify the approach taken in constructing a definition.

Form and Function Applied

Through an analysis of the literature it is possible to examine how this approach to defining ghost signs can be applied to a handful of sources cited.

Author	Function	Form
Stage (1989)	Commercial signage. No recognition of active/passive distinction.	Painted by professionals on brick, but now with a faded appearance.
Hart (2014)	Commercial and naming signage. Passive, either advertising a defunct enterprise or signifying a previous use of a building.	All forms produced by professionals on buildings, regardless of current appearance.
Bunford and Bunford (2012)	Commercial (including charitable/philanthropic), directional and naming signage. No recognition of active/passive distinction.	All forms produced by professionals on buildings, regardless of current appearance.

Table 1 – Application of Form and Function categories to three ghost signs authors' work.

This approach enables subtle distinctions adopted by different authors to be identified, labelled, and made explicit. This in turn allows their respective definitions, whether explicit (Stage 1989) or implicit (Bunford and Bunford 2012), to become apparent and open to critique. This systematic approach to analysing the form and function of signs is necessary to inform future debate on the nature of ghost signs.

A Note on Palimpsests

A palimpsest¹³ is the appearance of two or more signs in a single location, typically due to a more recent layer of paint gradually fading to reveal earlier painted layers below. An example on one wall in London's Stoke Newington features at least three layers, advertising Gillette, Criterion Matches and the Westminster Gazette respectively. In this instance the immediate question arises as to precisely which sign is being defined as a ghost sign.

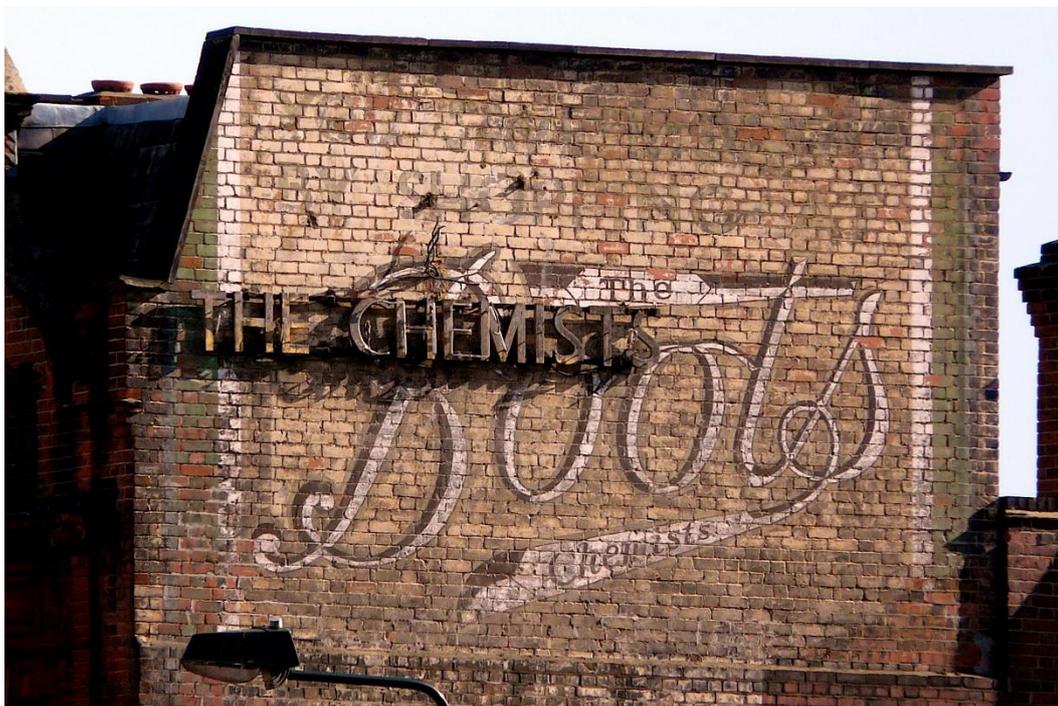


Illustration 1: Gillette/Criterion Matches/Westminster Gazette palimpsest, Stoke Newington Church Street, London, photograph by Sam Roberts/Ghostsigns

Considering the function of the signs in this example, each of the three is commercial, although there may be instances where different functions are served by different visible layers on a single wall. The active/passive distinction similarly becomes problematic; in this example the still trading Gillette is advertised alongside the long redundant Criterion Matches and Westminster Gazette.

Considering the form in this example, all three can easily be classified as painted and fading, while the level of this fade varies, presenting a problem if attempting to apply Stage's (1989) level of fadedness criterion. Similarly, the Criterion Matches sign features an illustrated element, whereas the Westminster Gazette sign is purely text based, making an overarching application of the form criteria difficult.

¹³ The term palimpsest has been appropriated within ghost signs circles from its original usage describing the washing or scraping away of text from parchment or manuscripts for the purposes of re-use. This often leads to older layers of text being visible beneath more recently added writing.



Boots the Chemists palimpsest, Camden High Street, London, photograph by Jane Parker/www.janeslondon.com

Not all palimpsests are created from multiple layers of painted signs. A sign for Boots the Chemists in London's Camden features a fading painted wall sign that then had a lit or neon sign placed over it. Remains of both are now visible, with parts missing from the lit sign, meaning that the form differs in each case across a number of the criteria identified.

The obvious solution to this conundrum presented by palimpsests is to treat them as multiple objects, analysing each independently using the form and function criteria outlined. This addresses the challenges of applying these criteria to the single location where the signs exist, but loses the essence of an overarching object comprised of these multiple constituent parts.

Fading Painted Signs

This chapter has examined various sources to develop an approach for analysing different definitions of 'ghost sign.' It has shown how this approach can significantly broaden or narrow the body of material included, and highlighted the diversity of interpretations adopted by 'experts' and 'amateurs' alike. While more purely descriptive terms such as 'fading ads' have rational appeal, the evocative nature of the term 'ghost sign' will undoubtedly endure. Its meaning may remain ambiguous but this chapter provides guidance on its use.

While we have provided justifications for the inclusion of most historic signage, whatever its function, it is to 'painted signs, fading on walls' that we return in our own definition of the term. This allows for a relatively liberal interpretation of function, even allowing the inclusion of both active and passive signs, while being more discerning when it comes to form. If anything, the 'on walls' component is perhaps surplus to requirements, if fading fascias are recognised as akin to those painted directly onto walls. This would then leave a working definition of 'fading painted signs.'

'Fading painted signs' is grounded in the notion of signs as object, without reference to contextual information such as the trading status of the business advertised or the age of the sign. It therefore provides a means to judge signs 'on sight,' using objective criteria drawn from the form and function categories. It also largely addresses the challenges of classifying palimpsests by allowing signs of any function, but restricting these to just those which feature multiple layers of fading paint. It does however face a challenge when attempting to classify 'faux' ghost signs, especially those created to appear faded.

'Fading painted signs' is not presented here as the only definition of 'ghost signs.' Rather, it is offered as a starting point for a more structured discussion and debate, informed by the terms of reference that have been outlined. It is now necessary to subject this working definition to critique from both 'experts' and 'amateurs' alike, and to further explore the nuances present within the form and function categories suggested.

Note

This is a pre-publication copy of the final article that can be found in Chapter 2 of Schutt, S., Roberts, S. & White, L. (Eds), [Advertising and Public Memory: Social, Cultural and Historical Perspectives on Ghost Signs](#). New York: Routledge.

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