

# When is the façade a fallacy? Standing up for signs that stand out.

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## When is the façade a fallacy?

Photo Essay : Standing up for signs that stand out

PAUL F. GEHL & ADAM KALLISH

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EDITOR'S NOTE

*A recent issue of Preservation magazine (March/April 2001) highlighted the views from Chicago's Ravenswood el line and included a piece on the fading wall signs of New York City. Adam Kallish and Paul Gehl got off the el and took a look at Chicago commercial signs, past and present, lost and found. Follow them along Madison Street to — history?*

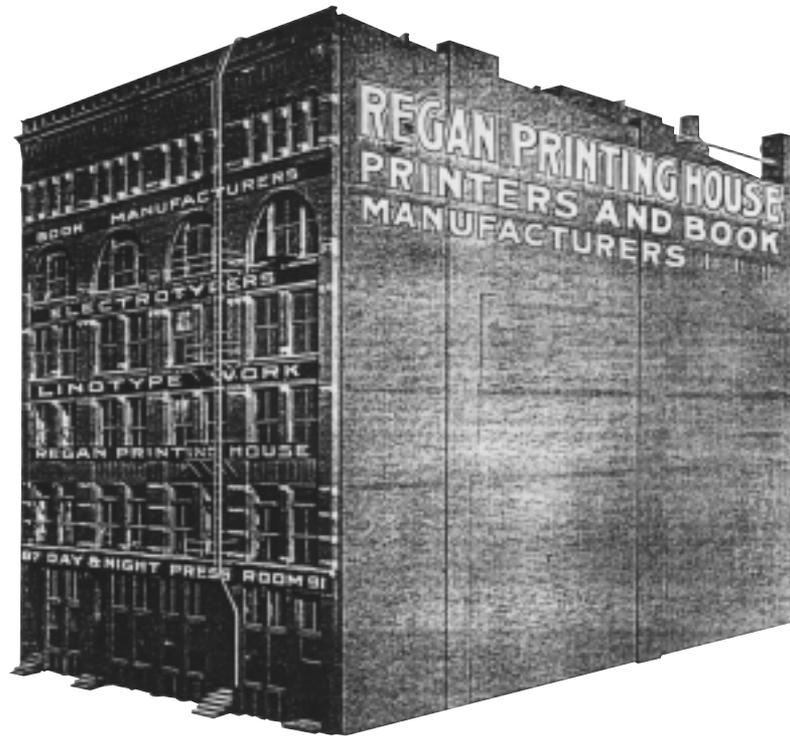
By all accounts, the Printer's Row Historic District on Chicago's near South Side is a resounding success. In the last 25 years, a once dilapidated section of the city has become

a vibrant, livable, and prosperous downtown residential neighborhood. Residents, architects, developers, the city, and several historic preservation agencies have saved a handsome body of industrial buildings through adaptive re-use.

*We should ask, however, what exactly have we saved, and from what?*

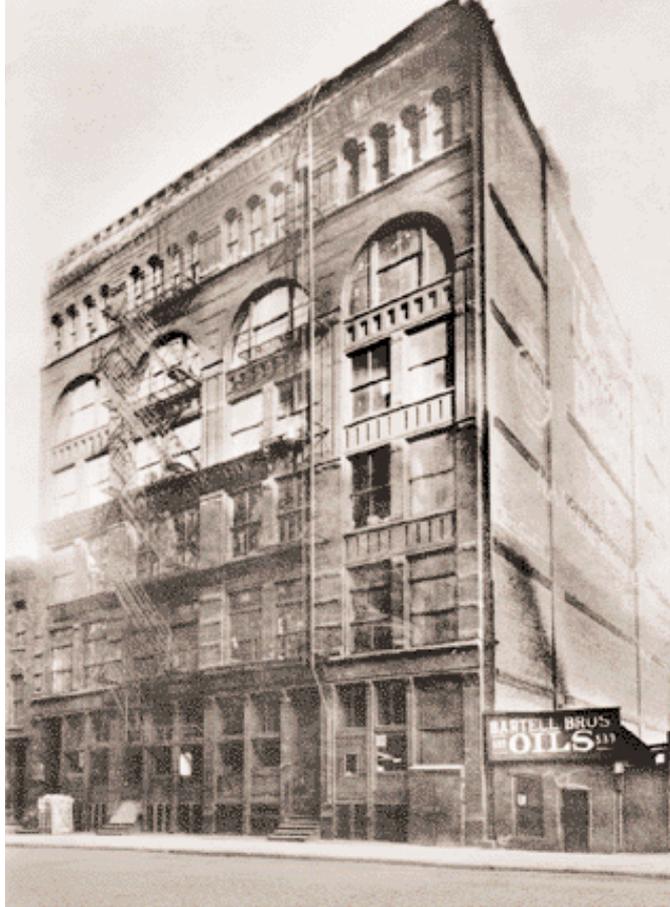
It takes only a glance at the images on these pages to see that we have carefully kept some parts of the past and not others. Gone is the graphic impact these splendid old commercial

structures once had, for the loud voice of hand-lettered signage has fallen silent. True, when restoring the arches, ornamental brick, and elegant curtain-wall structure of the Mergenthaler Building (once the Regan Printing Co.), architect Kenneth A. Schroeder also preserved an *urban ruin*, parts of the old Tom's Grill façade and sign. But even this witty nod to the commercial graphics of the old neighborhood does not begin to hint at the power of the building's original signage, which proclaimed aloud exactly what noisy work went on inside:



**Electrotypers! Linotype Work! Day and Night Press Rooms!**





*previous spread : The Mergenthaler Linotype building at 633 South Plymouth Court and the building at 619 S. LaSalle Street.*

*upper left : Regan Printing Co. building from a 1910 issue of their house organ, Printology. Courtesy of The Newberry Library.*

*bottom left : Brock & Rankin building, 619 S. LaSalle Street, from a letterhead of the 1930s. Courtesy of The Newberry Library.*

*above : The Peterson Type Building (the future Regan, and then Mergenthaler Building) in the late 1800s. Chicago Historical Society, Print and Photographs Department*

*upper right : A dilapidated Mergenthaler Building in 1975 with faded messages — ready for gentrification. Chicago Historical Society, Print and Photographs Department*

In many areas of Chicago, you can still see the shadows of period signs painted on the fronts or sides of buildings, faint echoes of the words they once spoke loudly.

Stewart Brand, in *How Buildings Learn* highlights the allure of saving the urban fabric, a fringe activity that eventually became chic. “Empty old factories, warehouses, terminals and enclosed docks were being bought up by visionary developers. Urban renewal had found a way to be acceptable. . . . It was so commercially attractive that you could do it with private funds.”

There have been so many conversions in Chicago that few true lofts are left to rehab, and so developers are creating new “loft” buildings to meet market demands. While the facades were “saved,” they were sandblasted and tidied up, to match the tastes of the new urban middle class. The Loop, once deserted after 5:00pm, now contains a critical mass of urban residents living in tasteful rehabilitated office buildings or factories.

*Where are the buildings of today that present pedestrians at ground level a clear sense of what is inside?* Well, not on Printer’s Row.

You need only drive west on Madison Street or other thoroughfares of the still-unfashionable West Side to find contemporary buildings that use lettering in ways that the Regan Printing Co. did a century ago. The signs of today are not about printing or manufacturing, but shout for storefront Baptist churches, local restaurants, electronics and food stores. They compete like those of Gilded Age Chicago for pedestrians' attention and they constitute the continuous, urban texture that middle-class America has rejected as clutter.

Someday, we may hope, photos like those of old Printer's Row will serve not just to decorate the lobbies and hallways of reused buildings, but also to give urban planners and designers license to preserve the larger meaning of an historic environment, including some of the glorious graphic clutter of Chicago. Meanwhile, let's think about what we have in our graphic world now that might be worth the same care as the architecture on Printer's Row.

#### For Further Exploration

##### Books and Periodicals

Stuart Brand, *How Buildings Learn: What Happens after They're Built*  
Viking Press 1994

Standford Anderson, Editor  
*On Streets*, MIT Press 1986

##### Online

[www.frankjump.com](http://www.frankjump.com)

[www.depaul.edu/~tseneca/signs](http://www.depaul.edu/~tseneca/signs)

[www.porcheztypo.com/Gazette/PTFSignageMalakoff.html](http://www.porcheztypo.com/Gazette/PTFSignageMalakoff.html)





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