

Alamo Renovations: Times of the Sign

Sam Hands misses the great days of outdoor signage.

Hands got into the signmaking business just before the 1973 energy crisis darkened most of the classic electric signage in this country. The best signs were art. They pulsed, swirled, walked and glowed in every color that neon science could conjure up.

"People were willing to invest money into these systems that would look great, that made a statement," says Hands, who started out in Cleveland and now owns Sign Services, Inc., in the Maine town of Stetson. "Not like nowadays when everything's just sort of blah."

So imagine Hands' delight at being asked to bring a taste of Golden Age cinema signage to Bucksport. "I jumped right out of my shorts," he says, when he got a look at the plans for a new sign for the Alamo Theatre. "I was ecstatic."

Hands' company started the project during the autumn and will complete it this spring. Tom Bakalars, a Boston architect who joined NHF's Board of Directors this year, designed the piece. And where many first-time visitors find themselves missing the Alamo as they drive up Main Street, the new sign will make it as plain as the nose on your face.

"The whole point is to say, 'Whoopee, here's a fun thing!'" says Executive Director David Weiss.

The bottom of the sign is a marquee that, seen from above, resembles a wedge. "Reader boards" will advertise film offerings. A vertical sign will spell out "Alamo" in bold letters. A panel showing the Northeast Historic Film logo will cap the structure. Neon and other lights will bring the whole works to life after dark.

The sign should solve a number of problems for NHF. A big one is the prevailing confusion about who occupies the building and what goes on there. The new sign should make plain that it's the Alamo Theatre, where NHF does its work, which includes showing movies and hosting community programs.

Visibility is another issue. The sign should add a visual spark to the Alamo, a 1916 building that's historic

but aesthetically underwhelming. NHF, says Bakalars, wanted a design that would advance the building's identity while being respectful of it. That required the use of transparent structural materials and a fine hand with proportion.

While a dazzling bauble of a sign may seem jarring on an 84-year-old building, it's actually a good fit if the building is a movie theater. In classic American cinema design, gaudiness is authentic — as is a sense of cultural dislocation, which may be the only way to explain what an "Alamo" is doing in a Yankee town like Bucksport in the first place.

"If you talked to the designers of the time, they would be telling you that they're selling a fantasy, and that made it legitimate," says Bakalars. "So we did the same thing, which puts it into a historical context, in my opinion."

Downtowns need lively signage, adds Sam Hands, whose business, family owned and run, puts up signs through much of the Northeast. If downtown is drab, he says, don't blame people for going to the mall. Brilliant signage has a pump-priming effect: by suggesting excitement, it invites excitement, a sentiment shared by Bucksport's town government.

Besides that, the Alamo job affords an unusual creative opportunity. "You just don't get the opportunity very many times to build something that's going to look so nice," he says. ■



Main Street, Bucksport, ca. 1950. Postcard from the NHF collection.

Executive Director's Report

Continued from Page 2

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