Sign Language
Once upon a time, downtown Portland shimmered under the glow of graphic art. Then a decree was declared across the land, and we took our billboards down. Some say it’s time to revisit the idea of commercial signage in an urban space. Others emphatically disagree.

Congress Street was once “The Great White Way,” full of pizazz, glitz, glamour, and hoards of theatergoers. Video footage from 1941 shows bright red electric signs spread across the urban landscape at mid-day. Former State Representative Herb Adams recalls “a large swirling soda-pop billboard looming over Congress Square.” Sears Roebuck, du Barry Beauty Salon, Benoit’s clothing store, and Owen Moore’s all had giant illuminated signs at all times of the day. It’s Cott
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Mainer Who Spearheaded Billboard Ban Dies at 94

The Associated Press, June 6, 2011

YORK—A former state lawmaker who spearheaded a legislative effort that removed billboards from Maine roadways more than three decades ago has died at 94.

Marion Fuller Brown was surrounded by family when she died Friday night at her home in York, according to her daughter, Martha Fuller Clark.

Brown’s daughters attended a legislative hearing in late April to thwart a pair of bills that would roll back the state’s billboard ban. Both bills are still pending.

After leaving the Legislature, Fuller Brown went on to found Scenic America, an organization that’s dedicated to preserving and enhancing the visual character of America’s communities and countryside.

Sen. Susan Collins says people who enjoy Maine’s natural beauty “owe a debt of gratitude to Marion Fuller Brown.”

Using the 1924 assessment photos as a point of departure for the Congress Street Historic District, should signs restored above Oak Street Studios on the corner of Congress and Park Streets?

FINE ART?

“Given outdoor advertising’s strong presence in public space, it seems reasonable and exciting to set up the possibility for art to be present in this field. The sudden existence of artistic speech mixed in with commercial speech provides a refreshing change of pace.”

“Kenneth Anger’s Astonish can function as recognition of the media’s ability to astonish, as a critique of its power over the public, or perhaps, as a call for the media to step up its game and actually create something that can truly astonish.

‘Commercial messaging tells you to buy; artistic messaging encourages you to look and to think.’”

–arkinetblog, quoting from MAK Center director Kimberli Meyer, Los Angeles

THE WAY WE WERE:

A brilliant Coke sign at the top of Congress Square beckoned to thirsty crowds.
around free speech that ultimately resulted in a national reputation for a progressive attitude toward visual cleanliness.

Given Maine’s economic dependence in many respects upon a tourist population which hails from billboard meccas to our south, it’s understandable, therefore, why GrowSmart Maine and others opposed two recent attempts to loosen restrictions on roadway advertising. But in protecting our scenic resources in undeveloped areas, have we sacrificed some of the same in our urban ones? Is ‘scenic beauty,’ in other words, dependent on context?

Joe Lewis, a Portland land use attorney with an office in the Time & Temperature building—named for its famous flashing billboard—thinks so. He notes the irony that the “obviously iconic” digital sign atop his roof, which was exempted from the State’s billboard law in 1992 because...
“50 EXTRAORDINARY AND ATTRACTIVE BILLBOARDS”

always like the creativity… Check out the large billboards this round. Most of them will capture your attention… Some will even change themselves according to weather and time!


Down the Pike

(Consider this exchange in the Maine State Legislature’s Transportation Committee last spring on MPBN, beginning with a quote from Sen. Doug Thomas, Ripley) “…I think there are some opportunities where a few billboards wouldn’t hurt a thing—they would help businesses, they would help direct traffic to those businesses. … How many jobs do we lose, and how do we affect our business climate. … I don’t have in mind a billboard on every stretch of road in Maine, but I think that we could find 25 or 50 to start and let’s see how it works.”

(State Sen. Bill Diamond of Windham replies:) “The potential, though, under what you just described, could be hundreds and hundreds of more billboards—maybe thousands.”

–Reported by A. J. Higgins

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Double-A Affiliate of the Boston Red Sox
AUGUSTA, Maine—Rep. Dennis Keschl of Belgrade wants to amend Maine’s more than 30-year-old ban on billboards and outdoor advertising. Keschl is the sponsor of LD1405, which would allow signs to be larger and more visible from interstate highways. It would not allow signs off business properties… [LD1405 died in committee and was never voted upon] –WMTW-TV, April 26, 2011

The desire to control urban form acts both to retard [present] organic development and freeze in place organic development that took place in the past,” Lewis says. “There’s a lot more future to Portland than there is past.”

For example, if Boston’s evolved interpretation of the Highway Beautification act had followed Portland’s, for better or worse, it’s unlikely there’d be a defining Citgo sign above Kenmore Square.

Did overly strict interpretations of the Highway Beautification Act result in state and local regulations that altered the urban charm of our city for the worse, or are they appropriate?

Both sides of this intriguing question might thoughtfully be revisited and refined as we look to the future.

So often in recent years, proposed modifications to individual buildings in the Arts District along the historic Congress Street corridor have been measured against the 1924 street...
When former Livermore state rep. Randall L. Berry opposed relaxing the ban on highway billboards last spring, he lodged a protest—validating his message by using a Photoshopped billboard to feature the controversial Labor mural Gov. LePage has been criticized for taking down in Augusta.

**ACTUALLY, I DESPISE URBAN BILLBOARDS**
“City dwellers aren’t immune to ugliness, and they don’t need a giant billboard to tell them what’s right down the street. Our downtowns aren’t areas we should trash up with billboard lights…then they’ll just look like any other place. Portland is beautiful because it doesn’t look like every other downtown.”
—Mary Tracy, President, Scenic America

**BILLBOARDS BELONG IN CITIES, MAYBE**
“The huge billboards on the roadside… I understand why those came down. They were eyesores. Having billboards in the city isn’t as bad or as distracting.
—Robert Cott, President, CD&M Communications

photo files kept in City Hall’s Assessor’s Department. If you look closely at those very photos along Congress Street, however, you can see the signs of our arts prosperity everywhere.