

Book Review:
Advertising and Public Memory: Social, Cultural and Historical Perspectives on Ghost Signs

Edited by Stefan Schutt, Sam Roberts and Leanne White
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Advertising and Public Memory: Social, Cultural and Historical Perspectives on Ghost Signs (2016) published by Routledge as a part of their series Research in Cultural and Media Studies. Edited by Stefan Schutt, Sam Roberts and Leanne White.

This fascinating edited collection brings together instances of Ghost Signs. In Sam Roberts and Geraldine Marshall's article 'What Is a Ghost Sign?' they look to shifting the meaning of the term and, in part, draw on The Society for Commercial Archeology who state, 'first it must be more than 50 years old, second it advertises a product that is now obsolete signage' (2016, p.16). For the most part the case studies are of neglect. In Rachel Jackson's chapter 'Historic Signs: Toward an Understanding of Their Community Value in Heritage Practice' the reader gets a sense of what contributes to that neglect. Jackson alerts us to a disconnect between the value of signage relative to architecture. If a sign is not located on a heritage building it is afforded little significance. This raises the question of who is determining what is of heritage value?

The capacity to visually map the past through the signs is highlighted through a student project in local Melbourne Australian suburbs in Robert Pascoe and Gerardo Papalia's 'Ghost Signs and the Teaching of Immigration History'. In 'Teaching the Ghost Signs of Seattle' Marie Wong writes of the benefits of combining academic research and civic engagement in a student led project culminating in an intervention and recommendations of how planning laws might be changed in Seattle in the United States to better protect the history these signs denote. However, to return to Jackson's argument in 'Historic Signs: Toward an Understanding of Their Community Value in Heritage Practice', she points to the fact that despite the strength of the social and historical meaning of the Ghost Sign this cannot at times stand in the way of the contemporary market value of advertising spaces. She points to 'Miss Completely' in Darlinghurst Sydney which is an iconic image painted in 1990 that advertised a boutique clothing store that despite a petition to leave it visible was boarded up. How these signs work, as collective or public memory is something Veerle De Houwer in 'Olive Oyl Ignites a Spark' notes 'They can even remind us of products and customs long forgotten...they can even be directly related to greater historical events' (2016, p. 254). He tells of the discovering of an advertisement in Belgium for the British Legion's assistance during the interwar period for people looking for the graves of loved ones.

I was struck by a comment in the closing chapter 'Although popular and gentrifying today Coburg was once an undesirable manufacturing hub whose name was associated with the nearby Pentridge Prison...' (2016, p.306) as a reductive comment that seems to be at odds with the quote from Doreen Massey a few pages later of place 'as a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus' (2016, p. 308). Just as a ghost sign is singular and in some instances 'out of time' it takes situating it in its broader social and historical context to recognize its nuances and significance. So too does a geographical space over time, such as Coburg, require nuanced consideration.

The strength of this collection is the glimpse each article gives into ephemeral moments of the past. Each Ghost Sign's iconography denotes an aspect of how companies have marketed to us in a particular time. What is missing from the collection is a theoretical discussion of what constitutes Public Memory. I thought the collection could be enriched by some use of theories of hauntology and a greater engagement with human geography as ways of reading ghost signs. In what ways might these instances of Ghost Signs speak to public memory? To explore this further would be a consideration of the signs place in public pedagogy. Who is the ghost behind the Ghost Sign?