Spatial Textures of Signification:

Raising the Status of Signage in the Urban Fabric.

Christian Williams

Proceedings of:

Spatial Textures of Signification:

Raising the Status of Signage in the Urban Fabric.

> Historic signs…are a resource which give insight into our society over the past two centuries... Some historic signs have become part of a cultural landscape and have value within a contemporary community, often more so than the physical limitations of a structure or town (Jackson & Lawrence 2006: 2).

The acknowledgement of vernacular commercial signage in Australian heritage and conservation guidelines (e.g. Wiggins & Blinkhorn 1991, Vines 1997, Jackson & Lawrence 2006) is notable. Ironically, attempts to preserve the past are among the most progressive in considering signage in the urban fabric of the Australian city. I propose this consideration needs to be taken further and, in this paper, argue for a rethinking of signage as *spatial* device, that weave together and articulate layers of cultural, social and physical urban textures historically and in contemporary cities. To do this, I utilise the analogy of the adorning fabric to appose the diverse major theoretical works of nineteenth century Austrian art theorist and architect Gottfried Semper and 'postmodern' architectural theorists Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, relating these both to Australian conservation aspirations and the present urban fabric.

A sign(age) is generally considered for its significance as a two-dimensional 'graphic' occupying the surface/s of a building, where the content is more relevant than the form. Taking signage content away to allow absence to illuminate presence has been the preoccupation of contemporary artists and while the intention may be to highlight the pervasiveness of visual messages, it also reveals the impact of the structures that hold these messages and how they articulate the actual physical and spatial fabric through their volumes and enclosing surfaces.

Nicolas Damiens, *Tokyo No Ads*, 2015. Courtesy of http://www.nicolasdamiens.com/project/tokyo-no-ads/
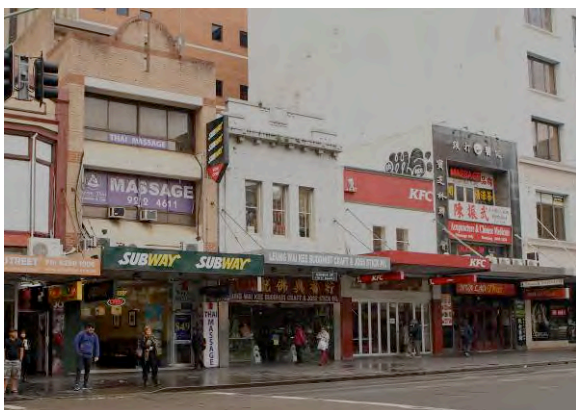
George Street, Haymarket, Sydney, 2015. Photo and diagram by author.

In his historiological tome, *Style: in the technical and tectonic arts, or, practical aesthetics* (2004[1860-62]), Semper noted the relation of the Germanic words *wand* (wall) and *gewand* (garment), exploring how the decorative surface, based on the original covering and binding functions of textile art and the *Beikelidungsprinzip* (principle of dressing)/*Beikleidung* (cladding) had a profound influence on architectural form and space creation. He was not, however, interested in providing a 'handbook for artistic practice' but in exploring how vernacular ornamentation and adornment 'comes into being' (2004[1860-62]: 71).
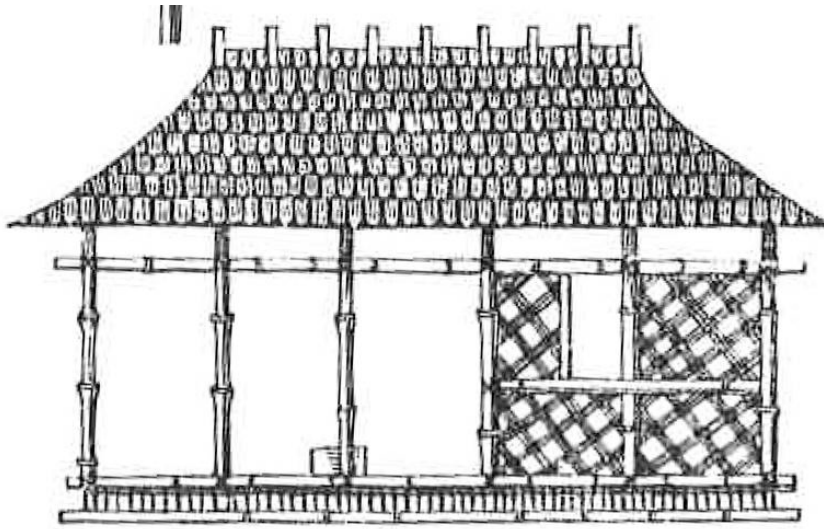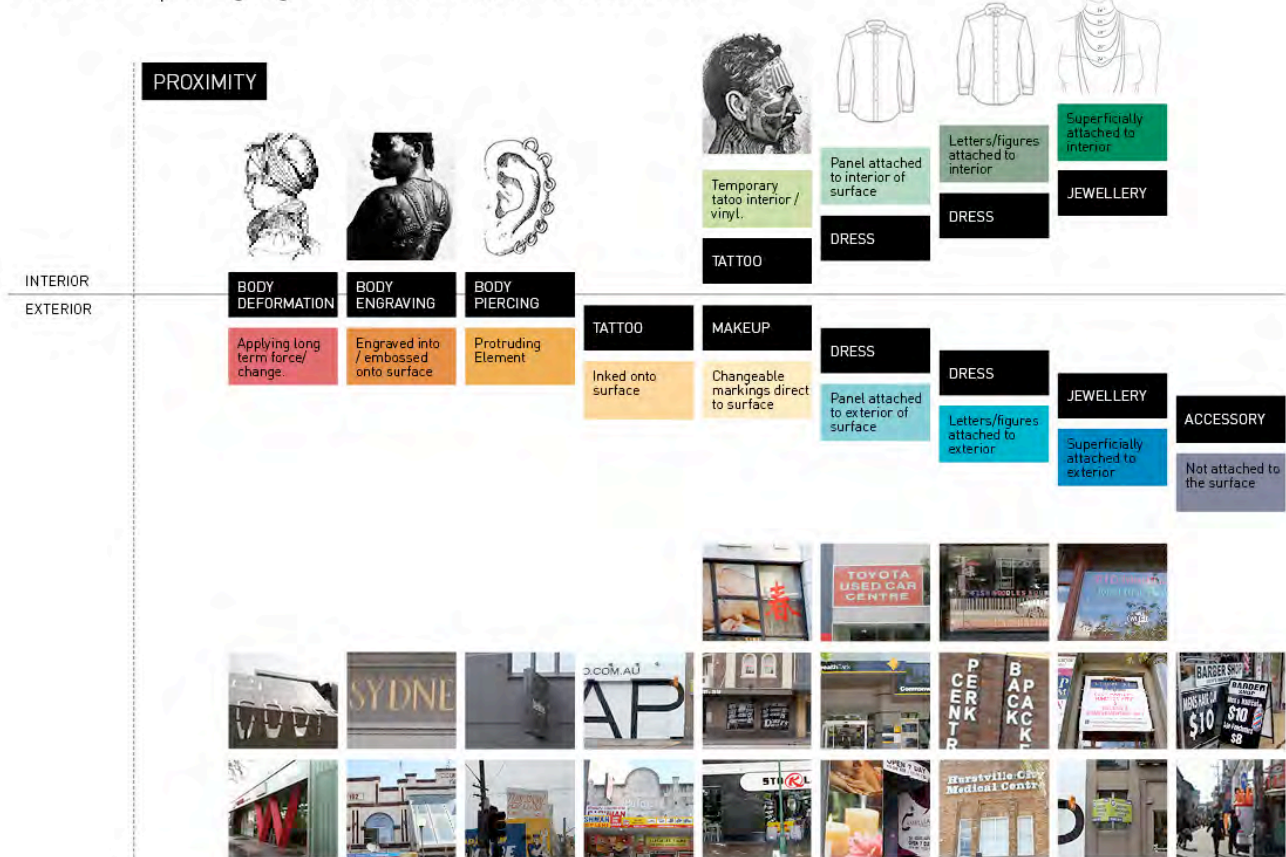
'This is an illustration of a model of a Caribbean bamboo hut displayed at the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London. It shows (…) the mat enclosure as a *spatial termination or wall.*' Image: Semper 2004[1860-62], 666.

Semper asserts that the weight bearing function of a wall is of secondary importance to the cladding of walls, for example colourful hanging carpets or woven mats, that are the 'visible boundaries of space' and therefore signify space. Semper contends that architecture, 'takes on meaning through its cladding or dressing, and especially so, through claddings metaphorical associations with clothing and its related embodiment' (Blais 2006: 128).

> Adornment is, in fact, a very remarkable cultural-historical phenomenon! It belongs to the privileges of man and is perhaps the oldest of which he made use (...) It is the first and most significant step toward art; (....) In adornment man tends to express that striving for individuality (...) whatever I adorn, be it living or inanimate, a part or a whole, I endow with a right to exist...(Semper, 1989[1951]: 270).
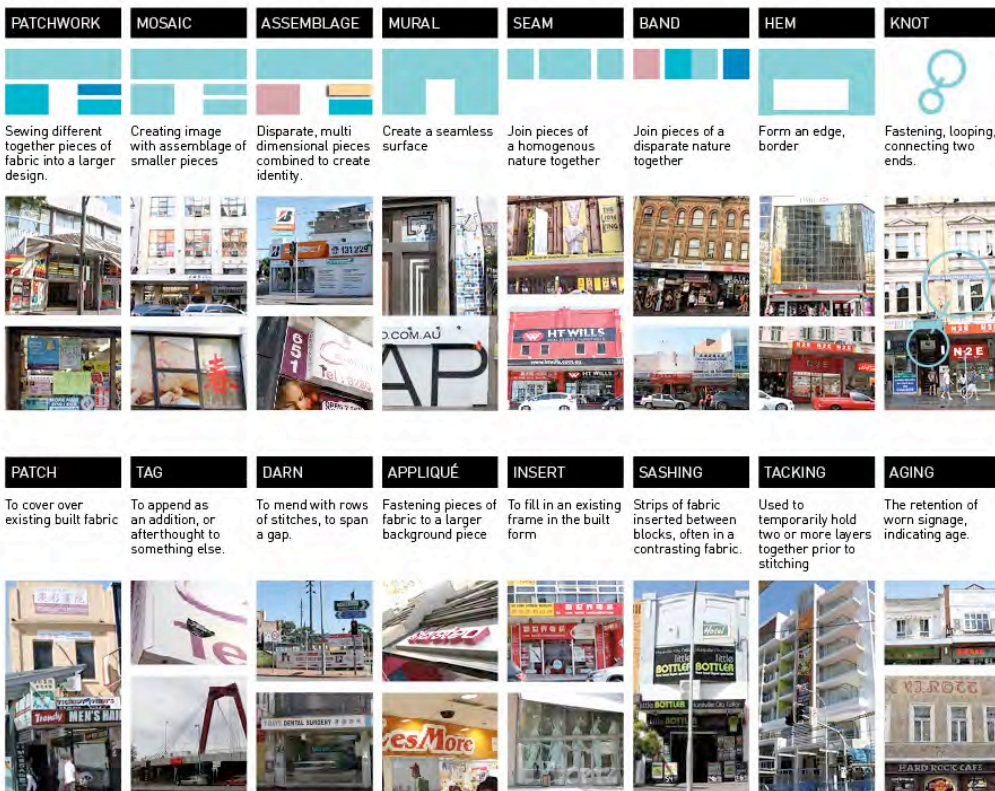
TO COVER, PROTECT, AND ENCLOSE
= relationship of signage units to their base structural form.

PROXIMITY

INTERIOR / EXTERIOR

Temporary tatoo interior / vinyl.
TATTOO

Panel attached to interior of surface
DRESS

Letters/figures attached to interior
DRESS

Superficially attached to interior
JEWELLERY

BODY DEFORMATION — Applying long term force/ change.

BODY ENGRAVING — Engraved into / embossed onto surface

BODY PIERCING — Protruding Element

TATTOO — Inked onto surface

MAKEUP — Changeable markings direct to surface

DRESS — Panel attached to exterior of surface

DRESS — Letters/figures attached to exterior

JEWELLERY — Superficially attached to exterior

ACCESSORY — Not attached to the surface

TO STRING AND BIND
= relationship of signage units to other signage units.

PATCHWORK	MOSAIC	ASSEMBLAGE	MURAL	SEAM	BAND	HEM	KNOT
Sewing different together pieces of fabric into a larger design.	Creating image with assemblage of smaller pieces	Disparate, multi dimensional pieces combined to create identity.	Create a seamless surface	Join pieces of a homogenous nature together	Join pieces of a disparate nature together	Form an edge, border	Fastening, looping, connecting two ends.

PATCH	TAG	DARN	APPLIQUÉ	INSERT	SASHING	TACKING	AGING
To cover over existing built fabric	To append as an addition, or afterthought to something else.	To mend with rows of stitches, to span a gap.	Fastening pieces of fabric to a larger background piece	To fill in an existing frame in the built form	Strips of fabric inserted between blocks, often in a contrasting fabric.	Used to temporarily hold two or more layers together prior to stitching	The retention of worn signage, indicating age.

Diagrams by author suggesting some relationships between signage and Semper's notion of the original covering and binding function of textiles.

As a typology of both ornamentation and cladding, signage is the device used by the everyday participant/performer in the city whereby they are able to produce an image/representation above and beyond the work of the building's creator. Jump forward 100 years from to Semper Venturi Scott Brown (VSBA) and their position that what everyday inhabitants of the city 'do' to buildings tends to be 'symbolic rather than structural' (Scott Brown 1971: 812). Their approach not only aligns with Semper's notion of adornment as signifier of identity and space but also uses a similar 'heuristic' methodology to map out the existence of vernacular ornamentation.

In their polemic Yale University study, *Learning From Las Vegas* (1972), VSBA analysed the 'commercial vernacular vocabularies' of the strip as a means of finding an 'appropriate symbolic architecture for our time,' (Venturi 1982: 109) rather than conforming to the 'modernist' doctrines for a 'universal' structural expression. They argued for a reevaluation of the organizing principle of traditional architecture, whereby it is now 'the image that contains' (Wigley 1990: 36) and like Semper, the signed/cladded wall becomes the effect producing element of space. Implicit in their argument is the analogy to the clothed body, where, rather than modifying the flesh to represent ourselves, we most commonly use representative covering. And just as clothes express the fashions, ideologies and trends of each age, so the layers and volumes of signage express the zeitgeist of the city.
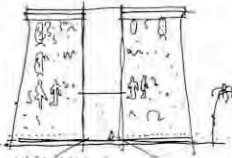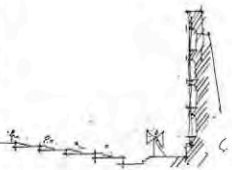
If you take the signs away, there is no place. (Venturi, 1972: 12)

Artworks where signage is removed by Gregor Graf. (Left) Hidden Town London: Situation 9 (2008) and (right) Hidden Town Linz: Situation 2 (2004) Image: http://www.gregorgraf.net/

Their study placed the popular architecture of the everyday squarely in the face of 'high architecture' when they compared today's commercial signage to the ancient surface decorations and decorative spatial arts of temples and cathedrals, Las Vegas as the 'scenographic city' to the architecture of Piazza San Marco, billboards to triumphal arches. Signage was therefore not only a relevant architectural and spatial device but a device that weaves the physical together with the social, commercial and cultural fabric.

'*A comparative analysis of "billboards" in space.*' Image: Venturi Scott Brown 1972: 13

In opposition to this, architect and writer Robin Boyd begins his discussion of '*The Australian Ugliness'* with the sentence, 'The ugliness I mean is only skin deep.' (Boyd 1960: 3), describing the veneered Australian aesthetic and pinpointing 'featurism' and 'the jigsaw puzzles of advertising signs,' as the primary culprits of this superficial ugliness. His outlook encapsulates the more common view of signage as a late twentieth century phenomena to blame for the 'visual pollution' plaguing our present-day urban fabric.

Robin Boyd. 1960, *The Australian ugliness*, Cheshire, Melbourne.

Similarly, heritage and urban planning guidelines lean towards a reductive approach whereby signage should be 'tidied up' so the urban fabric can 'regain' the quaint appearance of a time when architecture/built forms was the true signifier of space. I argue that this is akin to asking our cities to dress like conservative middle-class gentle people, to don tailored suits with appropriate ties rather than considering the social and commercial expression of the ready-to-wear masses.
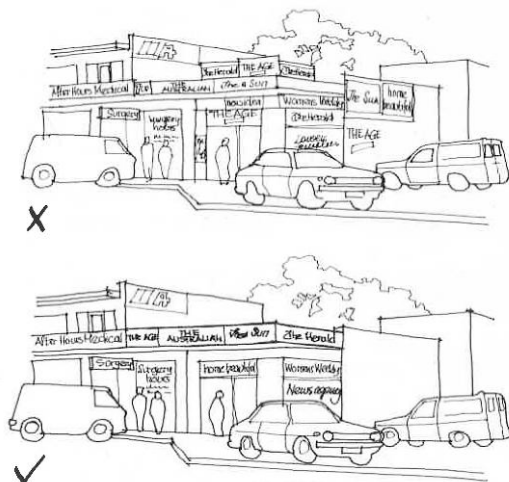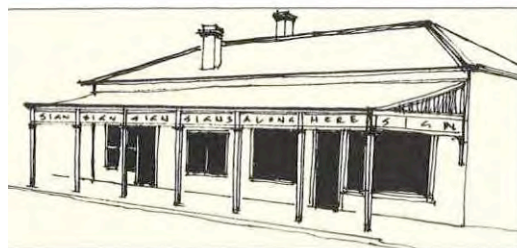

FIGURE 1 REDUCING SIGN CLUTTER

NSW Dept. Planning & Victorian Dept. Planning & Housing. 1991, *Outdoor Advertising: An Urban Based Approach*, pp 15.

'Main Street, Nairn SA – existing (above) and proposed (below) reconstruction for this early frontage currently covered in advertisements should allow for signage panels within the verandah structure'. Image: (Vines 1997: 20).

The reality is that the physical nature of signage as cladding has not changed markedly in style nor increased drastically in volume, at least since the mid-nineteenth century, where images show an uncanny similarity to the 'times squarification' and 'placardisation' of the urban fabric today. In many cases, the signage of today is less prominent than its predecessors and increasingly, signage is reduced and compacted into designed, urban screens which allow for multiple messages in the one physical manifestation.

270 Clarendon Street, South Melbourne, c.1905. Image: Latrobe Library.

270 Clarendon Street, South Melbourne. Image: Google maps. Accessed 24/09/15.

The Young and Jackson Hotel façade (1967). Image: State Library of Victoria Pictures Collection H2004.101/153A.

The Young and Jackson Hotel façade (c.2009). Image: Nick Kreisler (Banham 2011: 25).

Signage, as the ornamentation/adornment of commerical identity, forms the outermost layering and spatial articulation of our commercial strips, main streets and cultural precincts and therefore, I would argue, should be considered as important as building and architecture in the discussion of our urban fabric. Taking this a step further, I contend that signage is a significant thread in the long history of ornamental spatial enclosure in our urban fabric. Rather than continually attempting to mandate what signage should be, we could take the lead from the heuristic, analytic approaches of Semper and VSBA and spend more time understanding the spatial manifestations of signage 'as it is' and how it defines the social and physical experience of our urban fabric.

References:

Banham, S. & Poynor, R. 2011, *Characters : cultural stories revealed through typography*, Thames & Hudson Australia; State Library of Victoria, Port Melbourne, Vic.

Benjamin, A. 2006, 'Surface effects: Borromini, Semper, Loos', *The journal of architecture*, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 1-36.

Blais, M. 2006, 'Cladding and representation: between scenography and spectacle', paper presented to the *Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture*, Copenhagen.

Boyd, R. 1960, *The Australian ugliness*, Cheshire, Melbourne.

City of Sydney, 2005, *Development and Control Plan: Signage and Advertising Structures*.

Jackson, R. & Lawrance, C. 2006, *Conserving historic signs: conservation guidelines for historic signs and new signs on heritage buildings*, NSW Heritage Office.

NSW Heritage Office and the Department of Urban Affairs and Planning. 1996, *Investigating Fabric (Part of the NSW Heritage Manual)*.

Scott Brown, D. 1998[1971], 'Learning from pop', in K.M. Hays (ed.), *Architecture theory since 1968*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass, pp. 807-814.

Semper, G. 1989 [1851], *The four elements of architecture and other writings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge [England] ; New York.

Semper, G., Mallgrave, H.F. & Getty Research Institute. 2004 [1860-2], *Style: style in the technical and tectonic arts, or, Practical aesthetics*, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

Tibbets, G. 1984, *Lettering and signs on buildings c.1850-1900*, Australian Council of National Trusts, Melbourne.

Venturi, R., Brown, D.S. & Izenour, S. 1972, *Learning from Las Vegas*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.

Venturi, R. 1982, 'Diversity, relevance and representation in historicism or, plus ca change ...: plus, a plea for pattern all over architecture with a postscript on my mother's house', *Architectural Record*, pp. 114-119.

Vines, E. 1997, *Streetwise*, National Trust of Australia and the NSW Heritage Office.