

# Bending the Rules

## Saving iconic neon in Tucson

By Robin Donovan

**G**lenn Moyer has been ignoring the dilapidated “diving girl” hotel sign outside the Piccarreta Davis law firm for at least a couple years. The newly legal sign, perched on the firm’s corner lot for 65 years, beckons visitors. Moyer, who is both Tucson’s planning and sign-code administrator, allowed the illegal sign to remain under the city’s now-defunct sign ordinance.

The firm’s lawyers kept the sign at the expense of advertising their practice; the diving girl occupied all allotted space for signage on their property. They told

a reporter from the *Arizona Daily Star* that they still get calls about possible vacancies, despite having occupied the lot for decades.

According to Moyer, a change-of-copy request for the sign helped spark the recently passed Historic Landmark Sign ordinance amendment; because the sign was illegal, the request was withdrawn. Instead, it remained rusted and marred by graffiti, with most of its neon broken.

### **Painstaking progress**

In 2009, the city’s longstanding Citizen Sign Code Committee (CSCC) formed an ad-hoc committee to suggest a sign-code amendment sympathetic to historic signs like the diving girl.

The group spent 13 months considering similar efforts in Portland, OR; Orlando and Flagstaff, AZ, and debating the balance of saving old signs and preventing blight. Carlos Lozano, who runs the historically minded website, *VanishingTucson.com*, helped craft the ordinance revision: “We looked at it from every possible angle, basically considering worst-case scenarios for each part of the amendment,” he said. “The hardest part was defining what is historic. You can’t just go by date or materials.”

Tucsonians have been informally – and selectively – saving old neon signs for years, but many local icons have been lost over the years as properties changed hands and signs were taken down.

Debra Jane Seltzer has driven cross-country multiple times, documenting signage by state for her comprehensive website, *RoadsideArchitecture.com*. She considers vintage neon signs an integral part of Tucson’s history. These signs “reflect a time in America when Mom and Pops ruled. Businesses had their own unique identities, reflected in their one-of-a-kind signs,” she wrote in an email.

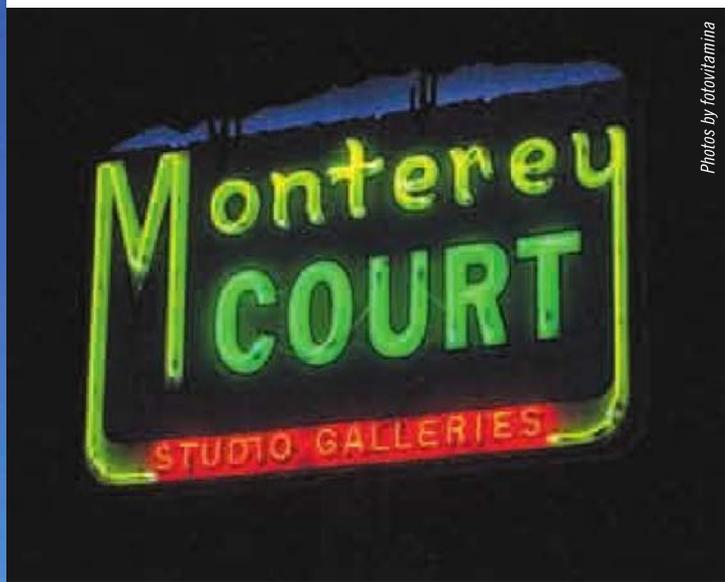
Demion Clinco, president of the Tucson Historic Preservation Foundation, also sat on the ad-hoc committee. He and Lozano surveyed the city in a preliminary study that identified 100 potentially salvageable, historic signs.

On June 28, the city finally approved a sign-code revision that seeks to formalize these efforts and prevent further attrition. This is welcome news to Clinco, who has already saved four signs as they were taken down. Other signs have been salvaged through online auctions and sales to sign museums.

After a series of committee approvals, public hearings and revisions, the code amendments were approved by the Tucson City Council.



Built by Acme Neon in the 1950s, this sign sits at the corner lot of a law firm. The diving girl was added years after the sign’s construction to advertise a swimming pool.



Photos by fotovitaminia

The 1940s “Monterey Motel” sign along Tucson’s Miracle Mile was repaired by Jude Cook of Cook & Co. Signmakers as the ordinance was being amended. The building was repurposed for artists’ studios.

The code isn’t perfect and, in its forced compromises, has something for everyone to dislike. The week before the amendment passed, grassroots opposition forced an already weary legion of sign-code supporters to keep aggressively lobbying for it. Clinco said these extensive efforts were required by a last-minute flood of complaints, many stemming from misinformation about how the ordinance would work.

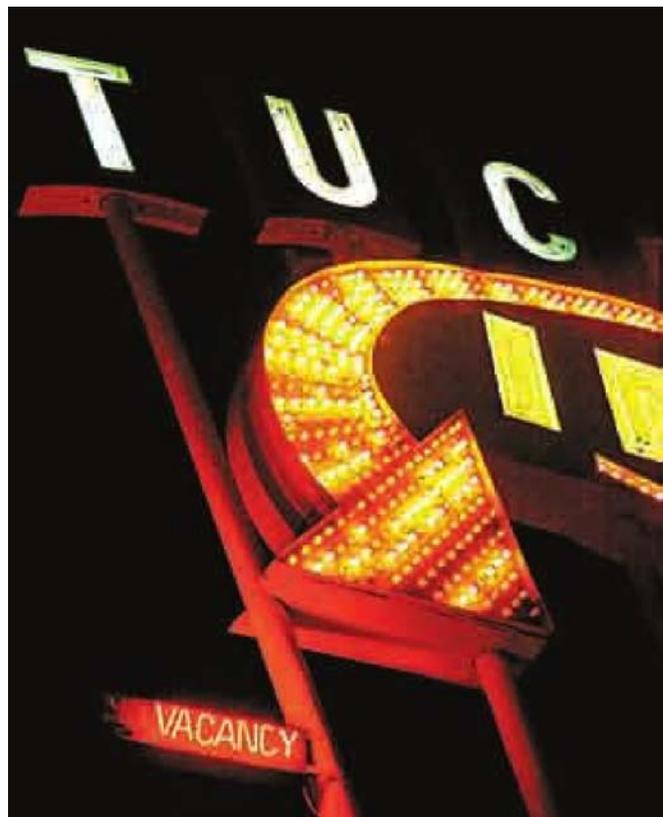
Opponents worry the revised code will open the door to preserve oversized signage. On the other hand, even some supporters worry the ordinance requires too much of business owners, who must go through a lengthy process to save historic signage.

Jonathan Mabry, Tucson’s historic-preservation officer, helped draft the new ordinance. Like many involved, he was elated, but not surprised, when the measure passed. Two years was a long time.

Mark Mayer, who has spent countless hours arguing against billboard proliferation, visibly opposed the ordinance. He spoke against the revised sign ordinance in Tucson in public hearings, seeking limitations to historic-sign designations in number and construction-date range. Mayer declined to comment for this article.

#### A “regressive, aggressive sign code”

Tucson, whose Speedway Blvd. was dubbed “America’s ugliest street” by the city’s mayor (*Life* magazine, July 24, 1970), is notorious for tough sign regulations. Clinco believes the previous, “regressive, aggressive sign code” stemmed from citizen concerns raised by the *Life* article. Not everyone, he cautioned, shared those concerns.



This Tucson Inn sign dates from the early 1960s. Six paddles each hold a letter of the city’s name, and an arrow is illuminated with chasing, incandescent bulbs.

That article suggests an anti-sign witchhunt to Tucsonians like Lozano, who said the publication’s photographers used “an extreme telephoto lens” to create the infamous Speedway image. The opening paragraph, if nothing else, paints a dim view of signage:

*It is now entirely within the realm of possibility for the American motorist to drive from the Atlantic Coast to the shore of the Pacific without encountering a single traffic light. But the only conceivable way he could avoid the junkyards and the jangling litany of the bill-*



(Top) Located along South 6th Ave. at the intersection of US 80 and 89, this Southwest Art-Deco sign, which originally read “Arizona Tourist Court,” features flat-block, double-tube letters and a radiating sunburst at its upper edge.

(Above) The Indian Hoop Dancer dazzles with five layers of neon, animated hoops and axial rotation. Constructed in 1958 by Zeon Electrical Products Co., it was rescued during building renovations in 1986 and kept in storage for 25 years.

*boards and sno-cone school of sculpture is to head for an airport and fly.*

Under Tucson’s old ordinance, any non-compliant sign taken down for repairs had to be brought into compliance before being replaced. If a building’s use changed, an existing neon sign could rarely be repurposed.

Today, a glance around Tucson reveals many heavily worn, broken and rusted neon signs kept by sympathizers. Thoughts of organized sign-code revision lay dormant for decades, despite a gradual erosion of signs.

“Neon signs were removed and not replaced, one by one, and the nostalgia of a few individuals here and there hasn’t been enough to save the lot,” Clinco explained.

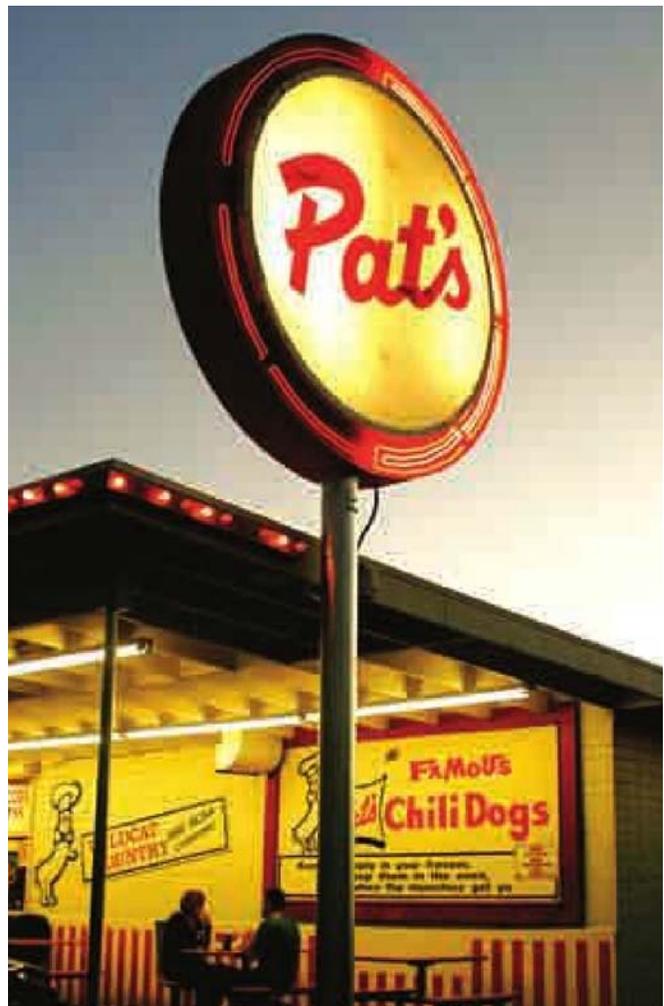
Shana and Richard Oseran own Tucson’s Hotel Congress and its roof-mounted, eponymous neon sign. In an editorial published by the *Arizona Daily Star*, they said, “The sign has transcended mere advertising to become a cherished element of Tucson’s identity: an indelible icon of the city. The sign survives only because the building has never changed. Had it become offices, regressive regulations would have forced its demolition.”

Moyer noted, despite these restrictions, the city has been operating under a system of uniformly applied leniency; signs that became illegal through changes of use were not cited until people complained about them. No one complained about the diving girl, though Moyer said he received several questions about the sign.

### **Historic neon reproductions and repairs**

Today, signage sentiments in Tucson have changed, as memorable city icons have disappeared. In an email, Seltzer wrote, “An increasing number of people consider these signs as works of art. They are vital, bright showpieces in an increasingly monotonous urban environment.”

Amendments to the ordinance will affect post-WWII-era signs and those built through 1974. Signs must be



evaluated and deemed historic after having met certain criteria. Then, they can be kept “as is,” adaptively reused, repaired and reconstructed, or relocated to areas with a concentration of historic signs (defined as three or more in a ½-mile radius).

This poses challenges for sign owners. First, signs must be deemed historic by the city after meeting technical and design criteria. Signs that are repaired must be restored to a “documented appearance,” such as that from an old postcard or photograph. Adaptively reused signs can have text changes, but only if the text matches the material, font, size and color of previous lettering.

Even after revisions are approved, restoring and repairing old neon requires extra time and care. Jude Cook, who served on the CSCC and owns Cook & Co. Signmakers, has done some restoration work already. He said it’s difficult to calculate how much time these jobs will take.

Cook sometimes performs restoration and repair work onsite with a bucket truck, due to the difficulty of pulling down old signs. First, he determines which images and neon are from the original sign. While in a basket, he sands, primes and paints each sign, handlettering it to preserve historical accuracy. He prefers not to use any vinyl: “Even good vinyl fails over time.”

For the Monterey Court sign (pictured), Cook spent eight hours on handlettering alone. In addition, he points out that some electrical housing holes on such old signs must be relocated, which requires more logistics on-site.

Asked if the ordinance will be a boon to neon

**(Left) The Lucky Wishbone opened in 1953 as Tucson’s first fast-food restaurant. The sign’s flashing, radiating neon, an emblem of the local chain, was built by Arizona Neon.**

**(Above) Famous for chili dogs and fries, Pat’s Drive-In has moved from E. Speedway Blvd., but this sign, constructed in 1962 by the ABCO Sign Co., hasn’t changed. The red-Plexiglas® acrylic lettering is encircled by four neon bands and housed in a metal raceway.**

shops, Cook hesitated. “It’s not going to be a major groundswell of activity,” he predicted. “It will take some time for people to become aware this is out there.” Still, salvaging the city’s neon, even before the ordinance revisions passed, “brought us work in a down economy,” he said. Cook estimates area neon shops will see just 2-3 additional jobs per year from the ordinance. Serving on the CSCC, he said, was hardly a move to drive business to his shop.

Mike Addis of Addisigns Inc. served alongside Cook on the CSCC. He agreed that the new code was hardly lucrative for signshops. Neon comprises only about 5% of his business. He expects a couple jobs a year and is one of the new ordinance’s reluctant supporters. “I support the revisions, but I think they’re narrow in their approach,” he said.

And so the mood in Tucson gives way from tiredness to last-minute lobbying to wondering how the new ordinance will play out. Whether signs are saved may largely be up to individual sign owners. Some have already said they’re willing to do whatever it takes to save their signs; for others, a framework is in now in place. ■