San Francisco Neon

SURVIVORS AND LOST ICONS

Photographs 1976–2015
by Al Barna and Randall Ann Homan

Foreword by Tom Downs
Neon Notes by Eric Lynxwiler

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1500 Bryant Street, a San Francisco landmark from 1954 to 1975. Photo from San Francisco History Center, sfpl.org
Foreword

Until I saw this book for the first time, I had always thought of the Ha-Ra as a cold, cranky sort of place run by Carl, a bartender (now retired) well known for his grumpiness. Somehow I had failed to appreciate what a good name Ha-Ra is for a bar. It’s something better than hurrah, and easier to spell. All it took for me to finally get it was Al Barna seeing it, clicking his camera’s shutter, and coming back a bit later to shoot it again from the other side. This thorough flip-side effect also captures the interesting fact that, due to some faulty wiring, the sign’s choked neon hallheartedly laughs at you (“Ha”) if you’re approaching from one direction, and waits until you have passed the place before it kicks in with the cheer (“Ra”).

The photos in this book express all of the reasons why neon belongs not in museums (and certainly not in scrap metal yards) but on the roofs of buildings, above doorways, in windows, on signs extending out over sidewalks. Neon is best in context. It enhances a cityscape, keeps a city’s spirits up in the wee small hours and in all kinds of weather, casts color on drab pavements, bounces crazy reflections off dark windows, draws the eye upward to where you might not otherwise be looking.

Turning the pages is like rounding corners, each new street view leading the eye towards colorful and irresistible neon. It’s a book of photos of signs – but we get much more than the signs. With keen observation comes realization and a deepening appreciation.

Diving in at random, we are confronted with neon beauties we may never have noticed or duly appreciated. On one spread, two pure beauties face one another: The Balboa Cafe sign, an astonishing study of electric color tones crisscrossed by power lines and telephone poles; and its complement, the blue-hued “D’s”. The latter is a detail from a sign above David’s Delicatessen on Geary, which is actually hidden by a low-slung awning. It’s nevertheless as a reward for the neon connoisseur leaving no stone unturned. This book will teach you to peer around or beneath every accessory slapped onto a building in recent years, where finer accoutrements may lurk.

Photos can be studied at length for the clues they contain about our city’s past and present. The shot of Pop’s, on 24th Street, reminds me of some of my dad’s old Kodachrome slides taken in San Francisco in the 1950s. The light, the muted colors, the neon martini, the bay windows, and the mesh of electrical wires in the background tell us this corner hasn’t changed much in 50 or 60 years.

I’m also partial to the careful study of upper level Chinatown, a neighborhood that rewards the astute observer who frequently casts an eye towards the second and third floor of buildings, where old signs from defunct businesses hang onto brick walls like tattoos of shapely women on an old sailor’s arm. Many of these signs are no longer working.
San Francisco deserves its place among the neon-illuminated cities of New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas. Its glow was once just as bright.

My memories of San Francisco in the 1980s recall dark streets punctuated by lonely bursts of neon. Sure, there were still great conglomerations of light in tourist havens such as Fisherman’s Wharf and North Beach, but the locals appeared to have let go of their mid-century grasp of neon signage. What remained by the time I first visited were rusted hulks of amazement in the shape of chefs, dunking donuts, smiling sea creatures and so many, oh so many martini glasses.

Many of those neon-lit businesses were trying to stand out in the busy streetscape. After WWII, the burgeoning American dream granted many small business owners the opportunity to see their names in lights and shops across the nation adopted a look-what-we-can-do attitude with visually competitive neon designs.

That glorious, glowing bubble burst by the 1970s and those distinct, mom-n-pop neon signs began to disappear. For pharmacies, fast food restaurants, hotels, and motels, it was the growth of corporate America that squeezed out the little guy and replaced creative and elegant neon with homogenous, plastic signs that could be produced cheaply and en masse. The era of the home-grown business had passed and taken those unique neon designs with it.

Like the rest of the country, San Francisco lost a wealth of amazing neon signs. Still, to retain and restore the classic neon signs that exist—and to walk under the colorful light of a neon night—is a dream worth having.

— Eric Lynxwiler 2014
The photographs in this book, and these stories behind the signs, can be a catalyst for San Francisco to preserve their unique landscape and the small businesses that these signs represent. Hundreds of signs were destroyed during 1970s urban redevelopment. It seemed like a bit of a miracle when a 1920s Art Deco neon sign survives intact. Regrettably, there are signs that couldn’t fit within the size and time limits of this book. We tried to show the inherent beauty in each sign, and these stories behind the signs, can be a catalyst for San Franciscans to preserve their urban redevelopment. It seems like a bit of a miracle when a 1920s Art Deco neon sign survives intact. Regrettably, there are signs that couldn’t fit within the size and time limits of this book. We tried to show the inherent beauty in each sign, and these stories behind the signs, can be a catalyst for San Franciscans to preserve their urban redevelopment. 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Union Square
Pg Location
12 John’s Grill, 63 Ellis Street
68 Tad’s Steakhouse, 120 Powell Street
134 Marquard’s, 167 Powell Street
78 Mason O’Farrell Garage, 325 Mason Street
13 Hotel Stratford, 242 Powell Street
4 City of Paris Department Store, 150 Stockton Street
122 Britex Fabrics, 146 Geary Street
124 Sear’s Fine Foods, 439 Powell Street
87 Chancellor Hotel, 431 Powell Street
56 Starlight Room, 450 Powell Street
88 Pizza by the Slice, Bella Luca, 418 Geary Street
65 David’s Delicatessen, 474 Geary Street
122 Curran Theatre, 445 Geary Street
132 Clift Hotel, 495 Geary Street

Van Ness and Polk Gulch
Pg Location
20 Alhambra Theatre, 2330 Polk Street
69 Van Ness Launderette, 2352 Van Ness Avenue
162 OFFICE, Inn on Broadway, 2201 Van Ness Avenue
123 Deovel and Sons, 1680 Pine Street
3 Leland Hotel, 1335 Polk Street
89 Victor’s, 1411 Polk Street
117 Mayes Oyster House, 1233 Polk Street
106 Ellis Brooks Chevrolet, 1395 Van Ness Avenue
84 Tommy’s Joynt, 1101 Geary Boulevard
83 Neon Clock, British Motor Cars, 999 Van Ness Avenue
144 First Aid, Polk Street and Ivy Alley

West Portal
Pg Location
100 Philosophers Club, 824 Ulloa Street
108 Manor Coffee Shop, 321 West Portal Avenue

Black = Sign exists and neon is illuminated at night
Red = Sign exists but neon tubes are missing or need repair
Blue = Extinct or removed sign
Praise for San Francisco Neon

I have to confess that I have long envied San Francisco for its especially rich concentration of colorful and inventive neon-bedecked storefronts. San Francisco Neon captures the magic of these signs into a single glowing portfolio that will provide a lasting record of these important but endangered cultural landmarks”.

Just when you thought you knew everything about San Francisco, along comes Al Barna’s and Randall Ann Homan’s book, San Francisco Neon With beautiful photography, paging through is like strolling down the streets of a familiar city with a new vantage point. You’ll never look at San Francisco streets in quite the same way again. If just one of these neon survivors gets saved from demolition, this book is a huge success.
— Andrew Danish, co-author of Palm Springs Weekend (Chronicle Books)

For some, a neon sign is a quick burst of color in their peripheral vision. For others, it is art. For me, a neon sign has a larger significance. It is an important place marker in our collective history. The beautiful photographs in San Francisco Neon are pleasing to the eye but they also awaken my San Francisco pride. What would a drive across the Golden Gate Bridge be without the neon clock at the toll plaza? How attractive would the 500 Club be with a backlit plastic sign? When a neon sign disappears, not only is the visual landscape a whole lot duller, there’s one less bookmark in our unique story.
— Heather M. David, author of Mid-Century by the Bay (CalMod Books)

This wonderful book offers a uniquely atmospheric tour of a world that is rapidly disappearing. It’s at once a gift to designers and a souvenir of the colorful night world of the City by the Bay. Some of the photographs have a cinematic quality, or inspire film noir reveries, with vibrant signs that beckon, warm and welcoming, to denizens of the night. One half expects to see Hopper’s Nighthawks illuminated in the glow. Tighter shots focus on whimsical details and the inventive compositions of the signs themselves. The photographers know San Francisco well, and deserve praise for capturing these charming and often remarkable signs with such affection and care.
— Richard Sala