

# PROPOSAL TO INCLUDE GHOST SIGN LANGUAGE IN THE MUNICIPAL CODE

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## STATEMENT OF INTENT

In order to promote and practice heritage preservation in La Crosse, it is in our best interest as a municipality to survey and attend to the early building structures of our community. The majority of early La Crosse buildings and settlements are made out of brick, a durable material that is self-sustaining in the way that it is breathable and can rid itself of moisture naturally. With the industrial revolution came the artistry of advertising, which propelled the practice of hand-painting advertisements on the side of brick buildings. These advertisements are now referred to as Ghost signs, due to their faded appearance, their age, and the way they are segments of a community's cultural history. Many local business owners have inquired about these signs and what can be done with them, if they are responsible for them, if they are protected by some form of legislation, if they can be restored, if they can be removed, or if they can be covered up. Without recognition of ghost signs in the municipal code, it has been difficult to respond to these kinds of questions, as they do not necessarily fit into the types of signs defined in our code already. These signs are particularly complex, in the way that most of them are original, one-of-a-kind paintings that were created by local artists, but also were created on structures that were not intended to be painted on. The community is demonstrating investment and concern for these artifacts, which has ignited this research. The intention of this project is to determine what our municipality can do regarding these signs so that we can provide guidance for community members, protect our brick structures, and preserve La Crosse Heritage in a meaningful way.

## EXAMPLE DEFINITIONS OF “GHOST SIGN”

- “Ghost sign means a faded painted sign that is more than fifty (50) years old that remains from an earlier time. Ghost signs provide evidence of the history of the use of the building, product, service, events, or activities of the community.” (Mesquite, TX)
- “A sign of historic nature and character painted on the side of a building. These signs generally serve no current purpose with regards to commercial or noncommercial advertising.” (Arkadelphia, AR)
- “A painted wall sign that remains from an earlier time or advertises the use of a building that provides evidence of the history of the use of the building or activities of the community. A “Ghost Sign” is not considered an off-premise sign.” (Oak Park, IL)
- “A remaining image of a hand painted sign on the exterior of a building or structure that existed prior to 1970” (Clarksville, TN)
- “A sign, painted upon the façade of a building, that is in excess of fifty (50) years old and which generally advertises an extinct business” (Helena MT)

## RELATED TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

### Art

- The expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power (Oxford Dictionary).
- “Produced as an artistic effort or for decorative purposes” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary).

### Brick

- “A small rectangular block typically mad of fired or sun-dried clay, used in a building” (Oxford dictionary).

### Illuminated light Capsules

- “Intricately mapped projections that resurrect ghost signs, the faded historic advertisements painted on the sides of buildings” (Faded ‘ghost signs’ given new life in Astoria - OPB).

### Mortar

- “A workable paste which hardens to bind building blocks such as stones, bricks, and concrete masonry units, to fill and seal the irregular gaps between them, spread the weight of them evenly, and sometimes to add decorative colors or patterns to masonry walls.” (Wikipedia).

### Mural

- “A painting or other work of art executed directly on a wall” (Oxford Dictionary).

### Obsolete product

- A product that is “no longer produced or used; out of date” (Oxford Dictionary).

### Patina

- “A usually green film formed naturally on copper and bronze by long exposure or artificially (as by acids) and often valued aesthetically for its color” (Merriam Webster).

### Projection

- “The Presentation of an image on a surface” (Oxford Definition)

### Removal

- “The action of taking away or abolishing something unwanted” (Oxford Dictionary).

### Restoration

- “The action of returning something to a former owner, place or condition” (Oxford Dictionary).

### Revitalization

- “The action of imbuing something with new life and vitality” (Oxford Dictionary).
- “The process of making something grow, develop, or become successful again” (Cambridge Dictionary).

### Sign

- “Any device, fixture, placard, or structure that uses any color, form, graphic, illumination, symbol or writing to advertise, announces the purpose of, or identify the purpose of a person or entity, or to communicate information of any kind to the public (La Crosse Municicode).

# BEST PRACTICES FOR BRICK

## MAINTAINING ORIGINAL, UNPAINTED BRICK

### *Leave it as is*

The average lifespan for brick is over 500 years when it remains in its original form and is not exposed to compromising materials. In the ideal environment, brick can be expected to remain serviceable for 650 years. The best practice for making brick last is for it to remain unpainted, with minimal to no exposure to any cleaners, sealants, or other barriers and potential pollutants. The material is naturally porous, so moisture retention is inevitable. However, its porous nature also allows the material to rid itself of moisture, which is necessary to prevent mold growth and other forms of deterioration. When brick is painted, its ability to breathe and rid itself of moisture is compromised, as paint essentially clogs the pores. Paint on brick can often hinder our ability to see structural issues underneath, like cracks in mortar joints, soft mortar or efflorescence preventing these issues from being addressed and attended to, further shortening the life span of the structure.

### *Cleaning Brick*

Brick masonry itself can sometimes change color due its environment and age, often giving the appearance of a dirt coating, though cleaning brick is not necessary for its health. The appearance of brick can be affected by soot/smoke, metal stains, rust, paint, and tendrils (the remnants of ivy growth). If cleaning is desired it is best to assess the cause of the undesired appearance before taking any action so that the masonry can be best protected throughout the cleaning process. It is also important to understand the environmental, public, and personal safety threats that cleaning can cause. Cleaning can be done through water-based, chemical, or mechanical methods. The least harmful approach includes hosing the brick until the desired area is wet, then using a sponge or hard bristled brush with soap and water to gently scrub the surface. In any case, it is crucial to wear protective gear such as gloves, a face covering and safety goggles, as it is likely that the materials being shed in this process will be harmful to the eyes, skin and will contaminate the air.

## *Leave it as is*

Due to the advertising practices that emerged with the industrial revolution, many brick buildings have already been painted, and some have been re-painted over and over. Ghost signs are a result of this late 19<sup>th</sup>, early 20<sup>th</sup> century practice, meaning that the brick structures where the signs reside have already been compromised to some degree. Generally, the best and safest practice for preserving painted brick is to leave it as is. A non-profit organization, Texas Preservation, headquartered in San Marcos explains that: “repainting a historic sign can destroy the patina that is associated with its authenticity.” It is important in heritage preservation to consider the authenticity of original signs, however, not all painted brick signs are historical in nature, therefore it can be desirable to re-paint, clean or remove them.

### *Cleaning Painted Brick*

Cleaning painted brick is generally unnecessary, however it is helpful step when the goal is to restore a painting or remove paint. As discussed for cleaning un-painted brick, the least harmful approach includes hosing the brick until the desired area is wet, then using a sponge or hard bristled brush with soap and water to gently scrub the surface. When paint is present, it is especially important to utilize personal protective gear when cleaning, as there is increased exposure to potentially harmful materials. Many of the paints used at the time these paintings were created contained lead, which is an incredibly harmful pollutant that contaminate the air. In addition to wearing personal protective gear, it is crucial to have a plan in place for water and waste disposal due to the pollutants present. The Environmental Protection Agency requires under the federal Toxic Substances Control Act that and the Residential Lead-Based Activities Reduction Act that contractors working with paint on dwellings built before 1978 must be certified in lead-safe work practices.

### *Re-painting Brick*

Removing paint from brick surfaces can be very damaging to the integrity of the material, and it is not advised. Painting over already-painted brick does not usually damage the masonry further or expose it to more danger. The Historic National Trust suggests that it is usually better to re-paint ghost signs a sympathetic color rather than to remove the paint. The paint removal process will often be more destructive to the face of the brick, as it often removes the mortar and or its soft jointing, compromising its appearance and structural endurance. Re-painting brick rather than removing paint will also help to avoid

the disposal of potentially harmful materials, as many paints used for older signs contain lead. However, in cases where the paint is flaking or chipping and revival of the painting is desired, it may be necessary to remove some areas of paint that have loosened in order to achieve a simplistic, restored aesthetic. When it is necessary to remove paint due to chipping or layering, address only the necessary areas with water, a gentle cleansing brush, and if necessary, a paint scraper. To avoid further damage to the surface, it is best to use a breathable sealant or porous paint so that the material is not more constricted in its ability to breathe. Paints and clear sealants that are water and/or silicone based are typically the most breathable.

Many Ghost sign restoration projects have been executed in a way to preserve the authenticity of the original sign, addressing only the necessary details to return the sign to or maintain its legibility. In 2020, Brushcan Custom Murals & Hand Painted Signs restored three historical signs in Mooresville, North Carolina. The company hand cleaned the signs, re-painted only the necessary details, and sealed the paintings with acrylic urethane finish.



"Selz Chicago" and "Kelly Clothing" signs after the 2020 restoration project

A sign from 1913 in Queen Street in Ontario, Canada that reads "Loew's leads in Toronto. Show starts daily 9:30 AM" was also recently restored to resemble its original appearance. This project completed by Lori LeMare Studio Inc and was overseen by the Ontario Heritage Trust. The restoration includes the repointing of mortar, removal and cleaning of several layers of paint, replacement of some individual bricks, hand cleaning the surface, use of a clear, breathable mineral paint to coat the original sign, which was then finished with a breathable colored paint to restore the negative space of the sign.





Photograph of the Queen Street "Loew's" sign in 1942



Photograph of the Queen Street "Loew's" sign before the Restoration Project



Photograph of the Queen Street "Loew's" sign after the Restoration Project

### **Removing Paint from Brick**

The process of removing paint from brick can be extremely difficult to execute correctly, which is why it is best for the structure and the environment to leave the paintings alone. When removal is desired or it is necessary for a restoration project, however, the first course of action should be to assess the integrity of the wall underneath to ensure it can withstand any removal method. Testing a section of the wall before beginning the project can be helpful in determining the state of the structure. Generally, it is best to avoid chemical and mechanical methods as they are abrasive, pose many safety concerns, use more resources, and are likely to damage the mortar of the brick. Using a water-based cleaning method first can loosen up the paint to allow it to be more easily scraped off. Paint can be stubborn, particularly older, industrial, often lead-based paint that was used for these painted advertisements. When the gentle removal approach does not work, then it may be time to move onto a chemical or mechanical method.

**Chemical removal methods** usually include applying a layer of paint remover, which will then bond with the paint, causing a reaction that breaks the paint particles down. Once the reaction occurs, the wall should be rinsed so that the remover and the paint are cleared from the wall. Chemical methods are likely to create a rinse-water disposal challenge, and can also damage the mortar of the brick.

**Mechanical removal methods**, like sand-blasting, usually require a pressure system that sprays sand or other abrasive chemicals on the wall, which will penetrate the surface, allowing the paint to come off. The pressure used in mechanical methods is often too abrasive for the brick underneath, and can cause the bricks to crumble at an accelerated rate. Sand-blasting also can release particles of paint, sand, and any chemicals used into the air, creating an environmental safety issue. If water and/or chemicals are used, there will also be a rinse-water disposal issue.

## CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION

### *Ghost Sign Classification Criteria*

- Painted Directly on the exterior brick of a building
- 50 Years old or older
- Signifies the use of a building at a certain point in time OR advertises a product that demonstrates some aspect of the city's cultural history
- Faded to a noticeable point

*Over the course of this research, nineteen signs in La Crosse have been found to fit the criteria necessary to be classified as a Ghost Sign. Five additional signs were documented, but there has not been enough data collected regarding their age, therefore they do not (yet) meet the fifty-year age requirement. Additionally, one sign was found to fit all of the criteria aside from residing on a brick structure. The inventory collected includes all of the signs found to fit the criteria, as well as a few that should be considered although they deviate from the Ghost Sign classification criteria. The inventory created marks the signs according to the criterium that they do or do not follow.*

## THE GOALS

- **Create an understanding for the Historical significance of Ghost Signs**
  - Preserve historically/culturally significant signs
    - Artistry of painting?
    - Embody some aspect of La Crosse's cultural history?
- **Create concrete guidelines for classifying Ghost Signs**
- **Create Language regarding Ghost signs to include in our Municipal Code so that restoration can occur**
  - Explicitly differentiate Ghost Signs from other types of signs included in our sign code
    - "Art"? "Historical Signs"?
  - Include Ghost Sign restoration guidelines and requirements
    - Restoration Permits?
    - Material Disposal plans/requirements?
  - Include Ghost Sign removal restrictions
    - Should it be prohibited?
- **Find partners that are interested in or can perform the restoration**

## RESOURCES

[Oxford English Dictionary \(oed.com\)](https://www.oxforddictionaries.com/lookup-key/servlet/lookup-key?lookup-key=OED%20English%20Dictionary%20-%20OED%20.com)

<https://www.claybrick.org/news/500-years-average-brick-lifespan>

<https://mcgillrestoration.com/reasons-why-you-shouldnt-paint-your-brick-building/>

<https://www.preservationtexas.org/allmep/ghost-signs>

[Why This Common Reno Project Is So Controversial - Bob Vila](#)

<http://www.drkenjones.com/ghostsigns/AboutGS.php#:~:text=The%20sign%20should%20not%20be,The%20sign%20should%20be%20authentic>

## RESTORATION PRODUCTS & RESOURCES

[https://www.edisoncoatings.com/Home/Coatings/coatings.html?gad\\_source=1&gclid=EAlaIQobChMIpoOtstDYhQMVsDfUAR2FZAi8EAMYASAAEgJq3PD\\_BwE](https://www.edisoncoatings.com/Home/Coatings/coatings.html?gad_source=1&gclid=EAlaIQobChMIpoOtstDYhQMVsDfUAR2FZAi8EAMYASAAEgJq3PD_BwE)

<https://royalstonecare.co.uk/brick-cleaning-dos-and-donts/>

<https://www.kindhomesolutions.com/the-4-best-paints-for-painting-brick/>

[https://www.beeckmineralpaints.com/painting-bricks?gad\\_source=1&gclid=EAlaIQobChMInv-R6qvbhAMVEE1HAR3uLAFhEAAAYASAAEgKqa\\_D\\_BwE](https://www.beeckmineralpaints.com/painting-bricks?gad_source=1&gclid=EAlaIQobChMInv-R6qvbhAMVEE1HAR3uLAFhEAAAYASAAEgKqa_D_BwE)

## SUCCESSFUL RESTORATION PROJECTS

[https://dailyprogress.com/news/local/government-politics/a-ghost-sign-on-charlottesvilles-downtown-mall-is-coming-back-to-life/article\\_aebde8cc-1146-11ee-9df4-4b8671c21b16.html](https://dailyprogress.com/news/local/government-politics/a-ghost-sign-on-charlottesvilles-downtown-mall-is-coming-back-to-life/article_aebde8cc-1146-11ee-9df4-4b8671c21b16.html)

<https://www.heritagetrust.on.ca/ewg/ewg-home/learn/ghost-sign>

<https://hiddencityphila.org/2021/09/not-fade-away-the-aesthetic-debate-behind-preserving-ghost-signs/>

<https://savingplaces.org/stories/your-citys-ghost-signs-have-stories-to-tell>

<https://signsforsuccess.biz/brick-wall-murals-wont-alter-damage-building/>

<https://savingplaces.org/stories/faded-glory-the-restored-ghost-signs-of-mooresville-north-carolina>

<https://www.heritagetrust.on.ca/ewg/ewg-home/learn/ghost-sign>