

Proposal to amend the municipal code to include Ghost signs

Intent Statement:

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. The presence of ghost signs allows us to see hints of the culture of a community from long ago. However, recent discussions have found that paint can be very damaging for brick material in the way that it corks the pores of the brick, compromise the integrity of the material underneath.

Many local business owners have inquired about what can be done with ghost signs, if they are to be protected, if they can be restored, if they should go untouched, 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. This has been a tough debate in numerous communities in the way that ghost signs are important to understanding a community's history, yet it is just as, if not more important to preserve the foundation of the buildings underneath. This document includes definitions of ghost signs and terms related to the issue, an inventory of ghost signs in La Crosse, further information on the health of brick structures, as well as examples of efforts from other communities to address the issue.

Example Ghost Sign Definitions (from other municipalities):

- "*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:

- **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)

La Crosse Ghost sign inventory:



**Leithold Music Building & Jules Buildings
(116 4th Street S & 327 Pearl Street)**



**Leithold Music Building (North wall)
(116 4th Street S)**



**Doerflinger Building (Alley)
(400 Main Street)**



**Amanda's Academy of Dance
(329 Division Street)**



319 Main street



511 Main street



602 State Street



605 State Street



413 3rd Street



115 3rd Street



107 3rd Street



600 10th Street



111 7th Street



510 Island Street



1200 Caledonia Street



1200 Caledonia Street



1213 Caledonia Street

Criteria for Ghost sign Designation:

- Painted directly on the brick of a building
- 50 years or older
- Signifies the use of a building at a certain point in time OR advertises a product that demonstrates the culture of the city at the time it was produced
- Faded to a noticeable point

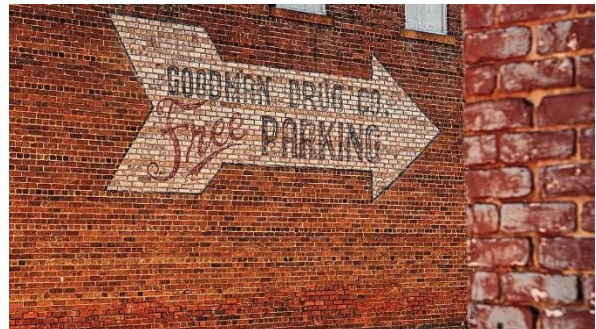
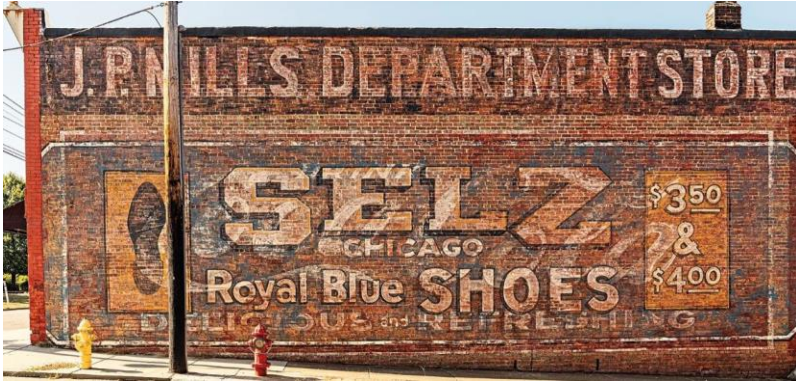
Issues surrounding the life span of brick:

- According to the **Clay Brick Association**, 500 years is the average lifespan for brick, and in the right environment will be able to remain serviceable for nearly 650 years. (<https://www.claybrick.org/news/500-years-average-brick-lifespan>)
- **McGill Restoration**, a structural preservation company explains that once brick is painted, it is immediately compromised, and exposes the structure to more possibilities of damage. Brick is a material that is naturally breathable and can release moisture from rain and other environmental factors on its own. When paint is introduced, the brick is now stripped of its porous nature that allow for the moisture to be released, trapping moisture in the brick which leads to erosion. (<https://mccgillrestoration.com/reasons-why-you-shouldnt-paint-your-brick-building/>)
- **Preservation Texas**, a non-profit organization, headquartered in San Marcos explains that: “repainting a historic sign can destroy the patina that is associated with its authenticity” (<https://www.preservationtexas.org/allmep/ghost-signs>)
- **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.

Successful Restoration Projects:

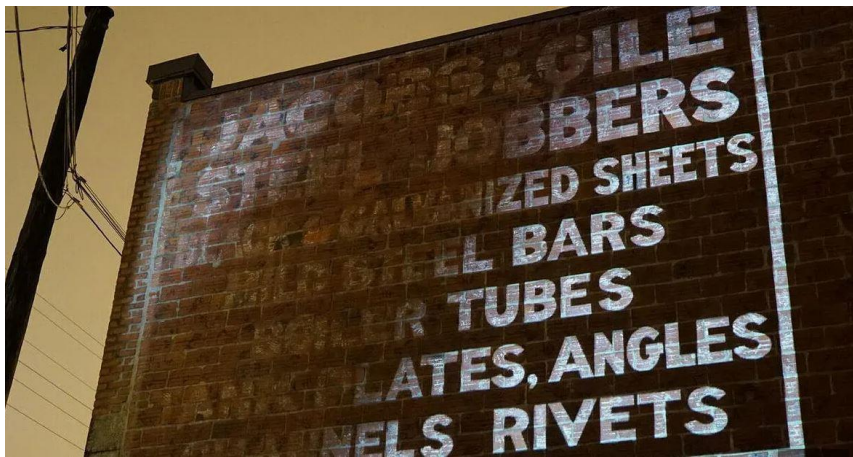
Mooreville, North Carolina in 2020 (Member of Main Street America Program)

- Brushcan Custom Murals & Hand painted signs was granted permission to restore three historical signs, not making them look “new”, rather enhancing the details that were faded to preserve the history of the signs.
- They cleaned the signs, sealed them with acrylic urethane finish, then painted only the details necessary to make the signs readable still– mimicking the way that painters used to mix colors, and allowing the paintings to still look naturally weathered.
- Residents of Mooreville have been pleased and feel a sense of pride in both the aesthetic of the town and their community’s dedication to preserve its history
- <https://savingplaces.org/stories/faded-glory-the-restored-ghost-signs-of-mooresville-north-carolina>



Winnipeg, Canada (2017)

- Artists are using light to digitally project old advertisements on the original buildings
- This story argues that painted signs are significant as they are individual and not a mass product, giving each sign distinct character
- The story argues that the feeling of a city comes from the collection of unique buildings, artifacts and landmarks
- <https://savingplaces.org/stories/your-citys-ghost-signs-have-stories-to-tell>



Charlottesville, VA downtown Mall sign restoration 2023

- This project was done to “amplify the authenticity of our historic district”
- The community believes that it is their responsibility to preserve “these fragile historic assets”
- The project restored an entire wall of ghost signs on the city’s Downtown Mall
- The cost of the project was \$32,000 and was covered by the Charlotte-based Coca-Cola Consolidated (since several of the signs were for Coca-Cola)

***This article has since required a subscription to The Daily Progress to view, though it did contain images of the signs that were restored

- 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

Ontario Heritage Trust, Queen Street project

- “The restoration process included hand-cleaning the wall’s surfaces in preparation for a new coating. Following cleaning, the original ghost lettering was protected with a clear, breathable masonry coating of mineral paint and then colored paint was used to restore the negative space of the sign, which brought out the lettering, making it legible again.”
- The restoration was completed by Lori LeMare Studio Inc. (an experienced ghost sign restoration and decorative artist team)
- [The Loew’s heritage sign: The restoration of a ghost sign | The Elgin and Winter Garden Theatre \(heritagetrust.on.ca\)](https://heritagetrust.on.ca)



Philadelphia Hidden City Organization

- Instead of restoring ghost signs with paint, the Artists on this project used digital illumination to recreate historical images, projecting them onto the wall of the original image
- hiddencityphila.org/2021/09/not-fade-away-the-aesthetic-debate-behind-preserving-ghost-signs/



Global Credit Union:

- “Conformable wall mural film that goes up with heat and looks like a mural, but no penetrations in the wall are required, and it will come down clean later without damaging the wall”
- “The murals are 8 feet x 10 feet each. The graphics were printed on 3M porous wall film, which is designed to conform to any rough or porous surface. It produces a painted-on look without the permanence of paint. Best of all, the removable adhesive allows for easy removal with no residue left behind.” (<https://signsforsuccess.biz/brick-wall-murals-wont-alter-damage-building/>)



Material Suggestions for painting/restoring signs:

- Best Masonry Paint: Loxon
 - o “If you’re looking for a paint that was specifically designed with brick in mind, look no further than Sherwin Williams Loxon. Loxon is a concrete and masonry coating that

offers fantastic weather protection. Unlike some other masonry products, it was designed to be more breathable. This allows the paint to act more like standard acrylic paint and reduces the risk of blistering and peeling. Loxon is versatile and can be used on bare, or previously painted concrete, stucco, masonry, and cement boards. We love that it comes in both flat and satin sheens and we are confident that you'll love the finished look." (<https://www.kindhomesolutions.com/the-4-best-paints-for-painting-brick/>)

- https://www.beeckmineralpaints.com/painting-bricks?gad_source=1&gclid=EAIaIQobChMIInv-R6qvbhAMVVEE1HAR3uLAFhEAAAYASAAEgKqa_D_BwE

Arguments *against* restoration:

- Texas Preservation
 - “Repainting a historic sign can destroy the patina that is associated with its authenticity”
 - **Patina:** A layer that is formed on a (stone) surface that is a result of oxidation or chemical process ([Patina - Wikipedia](#))
 - [Painted Advertising Signs aka “Ghost Signs” — Preservation Texas](#)
- Drken Jones: American Ghosts
 - “The sign should not be restored or recreated. Many signs have been restored, sometimes badly, sometimes so well that it is difficult to tell if the sign is or is not original. I found many restorations were more recreations, having no resemblance to the original graphics. The sign should be authentic. Many signs are new creations. For example, Central City and Blackhawk, Colorado, have added murals that look like old signs but advertise non-existent products. I also ran into some signs in New Mexico that were painted by the art department for a motion picture. Some of these are intentionally distressed to look old.
 - The sign should contain something interesting or unique. There are lots of interesting features of signs. I love the 'Where's Waldo' type of signs with the overlapping graphics making deciphering the contents a challenge.
 - There are some products, such as Coca Cola and Mail Pouch Tobacco, whose signs have become icons by themselves.
 - There are some signs that are interesting for their period fonts or graphics.
 - The signs should not be too recent. My guideline is that any sign that has more than six digits in the phone number is too new.
 - There are signs for long forgotten and quaint products, such as various patent medicines, that are time-capsules of another era. One of my favorites is the 'Dr.

Hoffman's Red Drops' sign in St. Louis, Missouri, that cures 'Colic, Cramps, and Cholera Morbus'.

- And then there are the signs with some social commentary unintentionally built in, such as the sign on a cafe in Huntington, Oregon, that states 'White Help Only'."
- <http://www.drkenjones.com/ghostsigns/AboutGS.php#:~:text=The%20sign%20should%20not%20be,The%20sign%20should%20be%20authentic>

Considerations for our municipal code regarding Ghost signs:

- Define Ghost Signs, Brick, and (Ghost Sign) Restoration
- Consider Ghost signs to be non-conforming signs or classify them as Art to differentiate them from modern day signs
- Address the effects of paint on brick
- Require that no sign shall be restored without having a valid sign permit for the restoration
 - An application must be submitted to the city for the Heritage Preservation Commission to review
 - A permit can be attained after review and approval from the Heritage Preservation Commission
- Include requirements of the restoration process (IF the application is approved):
 - The building owner must complete the project through an eligible restoration artist who will then properly:
 - Clean the sign
 - Seal the sign with a porous seal
 - Retouch the Sign with porous paint, mimicking the original painters' efforts (Colors, Artistry, Aesthetic) while preserving the aged image of the sign