

I am quoted this morning [June 20, 2014] in Blair Kamin's column in the Chicago Tribune on the Trump sign issue. We spoke yesterday about the history of sign regulation in the city and how the authors of the seminal book on the International Style, Hitchcock and Johnson (1932), prescribed sans serif lettering for modern buildings to respect their visual delicacy. They also urged architects to articulate a visual separation between sign and building. The rooftop sign was one way to do this. Rooftop signs were banned in progressive Chicago around the time of the Chicago Plan (1910), but returned with a vengeance in the 1920s.

Chicago architect Alfred Alschuler showed other ways, in the 1930s, to articulate but visually integrate bold graphics with building design, respecting the nature of the façade without becoming timid. Sullivan and Burnham had, decades earlier, inspired architects to incorporate sign design in ways that only European designers had attempted at the time. Chicago led the nation in terms of sign regulation and integration. And the city evolved and matured in its approach to signs, permitting some spectacular work by both architect and dedicated sign designer.

— MARTIN TREU

CITYSCAPES

BLAIR KAMIN, CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Some people are tired of the debate over the Trump sign. Not me. It's a healthy discussion, at least if you discount Donald Trump's personal attacks. The debate raises important questions about the presence of commercial signs along the evolving civic gem that is Chicago's downtown riverfront: Like, how big is too big?

We'll soon find out. Political momentum is building to ensure that the five-letter sign on Trump's 96-story riverfront skyscraper remains a one-time fiasco.

Ald. Brendan Reilly, 42nd, told me Thursday that he supports the creation of a special riverfront sign district "with reasonable limitations" on the size of signs.

"I'm working on a draft to start the conversation here at City Hall," tweeted Reilly, who joined with city zoning officials to approve the Trump sign. "Will be happy to share once it's drafted & expect feedback."

His comments follow those of Mayor Rahm Emanuel, who said Friday that he's asked his staff to examine how tighter regulations could prevent another "tasteless" sign like Trump's.

This shift in the political winds highlights the fascinating but fraught relationship between buildings and signs. Signs can inform and even delight, but

they can also create visual blight. Regulating them is as much art as science. But regulate them we must, even though that will disappoint the property rights advocates who say Trump can do what he wants with his building.

Property rights offer cherished protection against an intrusive state, but are not absolute. A zoning law that prevents me from building a factory next to your house restricts my economic freedom, but it's good for your property values and the air you breathe. Special sign districts like those Chicago has for Michigan Avenue and Oak Street tamp down on the visual pollution of sign overkill.

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The districts set limits on signs that help cities and districts maintain their collective character. Take Oak Street, with its fashionable boutiques. It's a human-scaled street of elegant understatement, and the rules for its special sign district reflect that. Letters of signs can be no more than 18 inches wide or high.

It's a fair bet that Trump will never build on Oak Street.

In an attempt to justify Trump's sign, the real estate developer and those in his corner are bringing up other notable signs on Chicago buildings, from The Drake sign atop the East Lake Shore Drive hotel to the Chicago Tribune sign that heralds this newspaper's neo-Gothic skyscraper. "Isn't Trump's sign being unfairly singled out?" these people say.

Hardly. All signs are not created alike. Some harmonize with their buildings and their settings. Others, like Trump's, harm both. Here are three elements that separate good signs from bad:

Separation: The scaffold-mounted, pink Gothic letters of the Drake sign seem to float above the roof of the grand old hotel. They don't interrupt its Italian Renaissance-inspired architecture. To the visual benefit of both, the building and the sign are clearly distinct. In contrast, Trump's sign resembles a giant buckle that draws your eyes to the tower's beltlike, horizontal lines and holds them there.

A skyscraper, the great Chicago architect Louis Sullivan once wrote, should rise "in sheer exultation ... without a single dissenting line." The Trump sign is that dissenting line.

Placement: The Tribune Tower's sign has more letters than Trump's, but its impact is muted because the sign is set back from the Chicago River by several hundred feet. Likewise, the signs on nearby high-rises, including those proclaiming Hotel 71 and Kemper, are located at or near the tops of their buildings. They're not in our face like the riverfront-hugging Trump sign, which is only 200 feet above ground.

Put those five letters atop the tower and they would have been far less intrusive.

Design integration: A sign should reflect the architecture of its building rather than being a clumsy add-on. In the 1930s, critics praised the sleek, sans serif letters PSFS atop the Philadelphia Saving Fund Society building, the nation's first International Style high-rise. The traditional serif type of the Trump sign, in contrast, fights the building's sleek, stainless steel exterior.

"The ideal is (an) architect-led integration with the building design. Not a fumbled attempt by an owner and limply subordinate sign company," said Chicago architect Martin Treu, author of the 2012 book "Signs, Streets, and Storefronts."

These and other elements need to be carefully thought through as Reilly and Emanuel devise ways to prevent a repeat of the Trump blight.

So does the need for an open process. On Tuesday, Jon Stewart joked that Chicago should have seen the sign coming given Trump's history of stamping his name on his buildings. But the sign deal, approved five years ago under Mayor Richard Daley, was only revealed this year when it was too late to stop.

Emanuel wisely realizes that he'll have more leverage in determining the shape of future signs along the riverfront than he will if he tries to force Trump to remove a sign approved by two administrations, including his own. Nevertheless, the mayor's harsh criticism is an effective use of public shaming, a way of transforming Trump's five-letter ego trip into the equivalent of a scarlet "A."

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