

SAN FRANCISCO NEON

SURVIVORS AND LOST ICONS

AL BARNA and RANDALL ANN HOMAN

SAN FRANCISCO NEON
SURVIVORS AND LOST ICONS

Photographs 1976–2026

by Al Barna and Randall Ann Homan

Foreword by Tom Downs

Neon Notes by Eric Lynxwiler

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SAN FRANCISCO
GATE B

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1550 Bryant Street, a San Francisco landmark from 1954 to 1975.
Photo: San Francisco Public Library History Center



875 Geary Street 2014 AB

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 barman (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 halfheartedly 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, lit up 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 accouterments 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, and some of the paint is peeling beneath the neon tubes. It's an example of the "arrested decay" celebrated in such places as the ghost town at Bodie, but in this case it's right in the middle of the densest and busiest neighborhood in San Francisco. Someday a local committee may decide these signs are bad for Chinatown and have them removed. Which is one reason why I'm already grateful for these photographs.

San Francisco's neon runs the gamut, from high culture to low, from art to pure functionality. Glamorous early 20th century movie houses and pompous Nob Hill hotels share space with mundane laundries, shoe repair shops, residential hotels, seedy bars, mom-and-pop markets, motor lodges, auto dealerships, parking garages, coffee shops, donut shops, restaurants, and funeral parlors. There are your basic one-word signs: wines, cigars, liquor, launderette, alterations, motel, grocery, office. And imperative signs: quiet through tunnel. There are champagne glasses, martini glasses, clocks, shoes, a smiling chef, a proud peacock, and a donut splashing into a cup of coffee. There are the abstractions of signs partially blocked from view and signs that only partially work. Sometimes neon is just one part of a complex sign, complementing painted words or combined with flashing incandescent bulbs that hearken to the swank of an even earlier era. Sometimes neon is fitted perfectly into chromium channeled letters. Sometimes it has no backdrop, hanging like a shirt drying in a shop window.

Half a century ago, neon could be appreciated for its collage effect in most urban environments in America. The temptation for the photographer was to try to get several dozen signs into a single shot. Nighttime images always looked like multiple exposures, every town turned into a small piece of Las Vegas or Times Square. Clots of lighted signs created luminous tents over our little islands of life. Perhaps it warded off the darkness of a universe proving to be far larger than we had ever imagined.

Neon is sparser now, more atmospheric and moody. A single sign, late on a cold night, may promise the comfort of a leatherette booth, where you might order something amber-colored in a glass. It can also have a haunting effect, casting powdery light into an empty laundry or onto a street on which no one seems to be awake.

Working signs have come to be regarded as survivors. Neon tubes can last decades, longer than most businesses. Hence, we may find an old cigar store sign above a shop selling T-shirts to tourists, or a sign of a defunct grocery casting its glow over a Chinese hardware store. Personally, I think the only thing keeping Tad's Steaks open is its irresistible sign. When an old sign is repaired, it is cause for a minor celebration, or at least a nod of approval. We love our neon, with the affection we have for all things that are disappearing.

— Tom Downs, 2014



875 Geary Street 2011 AB



Pier 43 1/2 2014 AB



3290 Sacramento Street 2025 AB



3010 Geary Street 2011 AB



2330 Polk Street 2011 AB



Corner Market and Annie Streets

2010 AB



2011 RH



2013 AB



429 Castro Street 2014 RH



3117 16th Street 2017 AB



401 Castro Street 2011 AB



901 Grant Avenue 2011 AB



815 Grant Avenue 2011 AB



720 and 710 Grant Avenue 2011 AB



1051 Grant Avenue 2011 AB



Clay Street at Spofford Alley 2026 AB



Pier 23 and The Embarcadero 2011 AB



3218 Mission Street 2013 AB



250 Hyde Street 2016 AB



766 Post Street 2014 AB



2095 Chestnut Street 2014 AB



2 Harrison Street 2013 AB

Photo Index by Neighborhood

This index includes all of the signs in this book, organized by neighborhood. You'll notice that some neighborhoods still have clusters of neon and some have lost all but one or two iconic signs. We've also indicated which signs illuminate and which signs have been removed/renamed as of this printing. We hope you get a chance to view many of these illuminated neon signs at twilight for full effect.

Black = Sign exists and neon is illuminated at night
Red = Sign exists but neon tubes are missing or need repair
Blue = Renamed or removed sign

Bernal Hill

Pg Location
75 Avedano's Holly Park Market, 235 Cortland Avenue



Castro/Mid-Market

Pg Location
91 First Baptist Church, Octavia and Waller Streets
66 It's Tops Fountain, 1801 Market Street
71 Little Hollywood Launderette, 1906 Market Street
71 The Mint Karaoke Lounge, 1942 Market Street
76 Cafe Du Nord, 2170 Market Street
25 Twin Peaks Tavern, 401 Castro Street
27 17th & Noe Market, 17th and Noe Streets
22 Castro Theatre, 429 Castro Street



Chinatown

Pg Location
28 YMCA Chinatown, 855 Sacramento Street
114 Masonic Lodge, 29 Waverly Place
31 Republic Hotel, 710 Grant Avenue
31 Wok Shop Gifts, 718 Grant Avenue
31 Eastern Bakery, 720 Grant Avenue
30 Peacock, Gifts & Arts, 815 Grant Avenue
29 Buddha Lounge, 901 Grant Avenue
28 Chinatown Restaurant, 744 Washington Street
33 Ginn Wall Hardware, 1016 Grant Avenue
36 Kaye's Footwear, 1043 Grant Avenue
34 Radio-TV, 1051 Grant Avenue
32 Oriental House of Beauty, 1055 Grant Avenue
35 Golden Star Radio, Clay Street at Spofford Alley
33 Great Wall Restaurant, 815 Washington Street
33 Chop Suey, New Woey Loy Goey Restaurant, 699 Jackson Street near Grant Avenue
33 Sam Wo Restaurant, 713 Clay Street
46 Great Star Theater, 636 Jackson Street
155 Li Po Cocktail Lounge, 916 Grant Avenue

Cole Valley

Pg Location
116 Sun Loy Laundry 784 Stanyan Street



Excelsior and Portola

Pg Location

103 Lido Pastry, 2684 San Bruno Avenue

152 Avenue Theater, 2650 San Bruno Avenue

101 Valente Marini Perata & Co., Funeral Directors, 4840 Mission Street

111 Central Drug Store, 4494 Mission Street

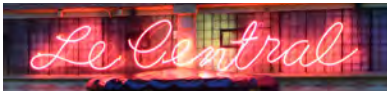
89 Little Joe's Pizza, 5006 Mission Street

Fillmore

Pg Location

18 Clay Theatre, 2261 Fillmore Street

72 D&M Liquors, 2200 Fillmore Street



Financial District

Pg Location

51 Shell Building Parking, 45 Battery Street

76 Harrington Bar & Grill, 245 Front Street

76 Schroeder's Restaurant, 240 Front Street

86 Tadich Grill, 240 California Street

111 Sam's Grill, 374 Bush Street

140 Le Central, 453 Bush Street

147 Patrick & Co, 33 Sutter Street



Fisherman's Wharf and Embarcadero

Pg Location

8 View Alcatraz, Pier 43 1/2

60 Alioto's Restaurant, 8 Fisherman's Wharf

61 Fisherman's Grotto, 9 Fisherman's Wharf

124 The Buena Vista Cafe, 2765 Hyde Street

105 Pier 23 Cafe, Pier 23 The Embarcadero

iv The Ferry Building, The Embarcadero at Market Street

131 Hills Brothers Coffee, 2 Harrison Street

Haight-Ashbury

Pg Location

163 Amoeba Music, 1855 Haight Street

128 John Murio's Trophy Room, 1811 Haight Street

Ingleside

Pg Location

141 Beep's Burgers, 1051 Ocean Avenue

Lower Haight

Pg Location

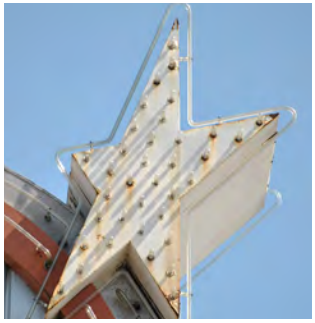
133 The Page Bar, 275 Divisadero Street

Heartfelt gratitude and appreciation:
Tom Downs helped us tell this story with his keen eye and understanding. Eric Lynxwiler helped us over hurdles with his expertise and enthusiasm. Susan Cartsonis and Lynn Hirshfield were the best brainstormers. Susan Aberth, Emily Blitzer, Mark Carrodus, Ellen Cartsonis, Oscar Coreas, Andrew Danish, Heather David, John Davies, Sherry and Jeff Davis, Terry Doyle, John Fadeff, Stephanie Finch, Ken Garcia, Roxanne Gentile, Chris Harris, Tom and Kelley Hawks, Lori Hébert, Kirsten Hively, Thaddeus Homan, Stephanie Hunt, Beca Lafore, Laurie Lewis, Julie Lindow, Maureen Keefe, John Law, Kimber Patterson, Heidi and Bill Plumb, Chuck Prophet, Tom Rozum, Richard Sala, Susan Salter-Reynolds, Allen Sawyer, Pansy Tom, JoAnn Ugolini, Don Williams, Jim Van Buskirk, and Angela Zusman gave us support, encouragement, and advice. Douglas Towne of the Society for Commercial Archeology and Mike Buhler of San Francisco Heritage helped to spread the word. Jim Rizzo of Neon Works shared his knowledge of local signs and neon expertise. Shawna Peterson and Libby Cahill generously taught us more than a thing or two about neon glass-bending and installation. Special thanks to business owners and workers who shared the details and history of their neon signs.

And of course, many thanks to our family, friends, and backers for their early support of this book, for appreciating San Francisco's historic neon landscape, and for showing great patience.



446 Columbus Avenue 2014 AB


1727 Lombard Street 2011 RH



29th and Church Streets 2014 RH



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by Al Barna and Randall Ann Homan

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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".
— Thomas E. Rinaldi, author of *New York Neon* (W. W. Norton)

Just when you thought you knew everything about San Francisco, along comes this book San Francisco Neon: Survivors and Lost Icons. *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 and designer 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

LOVE your book! So perfect in every way... Makes me want to see each and every sign in person.

—Louise Fili


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