Why a Duck?

The Development and Preservation of Signature Architecture in America

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Signs announce the upcoming rest stop along the turnpike. The food offerings are identical to the food offerings one hundred miles earlier. The signs for gas are the same-- so is the price. Upon exiting, there is, predictably, a Taco Bell, a McDonald’s, a Red Roof Inn, a Home Depot and a Wal-Mart. This is the American Roadside of the 21st Century-- the location could be Chicopee, Massachusetts, or Tallahassee, Florida. Everything has been pre-arranged and pre-packaged.

Not too long ago, the American roadways were dotted with giant milk-bottle shaped buildings selling dairy products and fast-food restaurants shaped like hamburgers. The historical significance of this creative building style known as signature or “duck” architecture can be determined by studying the evolution of the American roadside landscape. Understanding that the development of American architecture reflects the transitions of American history makes learning from architectural trends essential to understanding history. Studying signature architecture illustrates the struggles of the independent American spirit to reach the American Dream. The absence of new signature architecture buildings and the disappearance of classic buildings also teach about modern commerce. As the new rule for successful roadside businesses became repetition and homogeneity instead of uniqueness, “ducks” became anomalies. Many of these buildings were torn down years ago. Others survived thirty or forty years and were then lost to developers. Examining the circumstances of several endangered “ducks” can provide clues that may help protect other vestiges of a lost era and help preserve the character of American places.

Signature architecture has been for the most part ignored by architectural historians. The most notable scholarly examination of this quirky and distinctively American architecture occurred in the late 1960s, when architects Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven

Izenour coined the term "duck architecture" in honor of Long Island's Big Duck, the duck-shaped building that housed a shop for a poultry ranch. Contrasting signature architecture to the "decorated shed," an ordinary building with large signs, Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour note that the "duck is the special building that is a symbol."[1] In the early 1980s several books by amateur enthusiasts and photographers were published documenting (and lamenting) the disappearance of signature architecture. It is hard to simply define signature architecture partly because there is not an architectural field devoted to it. The term "signature architecture" can be used to describe a building designed by an architect in that architect's characteristic style. Also, several other terms are used to describe buildings that look like what they are selling or named. Signature architecture is alternately referred to as mimetic, programmatic (with one "m" or two), *architecture parlante* ("speaking architecture") or duck architecture. Using the word "duck" to represent this form of roadside architecture accentuates the childlike awe these buildings are intended to inspire and places a well-deserved, but often neglected, emphasis on fantasy in architecture.

The mass production of the automobile and its marketing to Americans led to the advent of what can be called "car culture"-- the American lifestyle of dependence on automobiles. Cars made it possible for those tired of crowded cities to escape on short joyrides, and eventually move out of the cities altogether and buy homes in the suburbs. The government began improving roads by allocating seventy-five million dollars in the Federal Road Act of 1916. In 1921, another Federal Road Act improved 200,000 miles of state highways by creating a national network of united roads. In 1925, one billion dollars was spent on improving highways.[2] Businesses followed the flow of people traveling on the improving roads. The commercial strip, defined by Larry R. Ford as simply "a major street of considerable length lined with commercial activities,"[3] developed along bustling roads on the outskirts of towns between the mid 1920s and the early 1940s.[4] This business corridor is not uniquely American-- Ford points to the Champs Elysées in Paris and the Diagonal in Barcelona as examples-- or even originally formed by the automobile, but the car helped shape the commercial strip into what Ford calls the "dominant element in the landscapes of North American cities."[5]

Unlike European cities with foundations in medieval times, Ford points out that American cities were not thought of as "compact" or "walled" but as "frontier settlements-- gateways to somewhere else... designed to facilitate movement and expansion."[6] Freedom-seeking motorists exploring the frontier would need to fill up the gas tank, stop for a bite to eat or have a night's rest. Pioneers of roadside enterprises envisioned capturing the travelers' business. The American frontier has always been associated with the image of a rugged individualist, and the frontier that the car opened up is no exception. Many roadside shops were independently owned. The majority of new merchants of the roadside were new to retail-- retirees, farmers, clerks, factory workers--hoping to bring in some extra income.[7] The belief that ingenuity would lead to success, one component of the American Dream, spawned thousands of small businesses started by resourceful entrepreneurs.

However inexperienced in retailing these new roadside merchants may have been, they had faith in American capitalism. Competition encouraged them to create buildings and signs that would grab attention.[8] With limited financial resources, the independent businessperson looked to a popular trend in the early 1900s-- "do-it-yourselfism."[9] Often, the ideas for the structures were conceived, designed and built by the owner. The conception is sometimes legendary, such as the origins of the Chili Bowl restaurant chain. In 1930, meat vendor Arthur Whizin was making deliveries. A customer tossed a cracked chili bowl at him and told him to do something with it. Whizin designed a bowl-shaped restaurant, sold his car to finance building it, and within nine years, he had eighteen Chili Bowl restaurants.[10]

The pressures from competitors forced the small business owner to become creative-- shifting from making bigger signs to making their buildings unforgettable. Even before the advent of automobiles, using signs to catch a passerby's attention was already commonplace, and the appearance of cars helped introduce bigger, more noticeable signs. Roadside vendors began advertising with large signs or billboards, but with competition growing in the mid-1920s, the small business owner needed something else to attract passing consumers.[11] During the 1920s, fads, gimmicks and novelties were concocted to engage the public's imagination, particularly by the roadside. One way for businesses to lure customers was creating buildings shaped like items exaggerated in size, resembling what they were selling.[12] People naturally have an interest in things out of scale, such as a smaller-than-life miniature village.[13] An affinity for things larger-than-life is especially American, as demonstrated by American folk tales, such as Paul Bunyan and his blue ox, Babe. Motorists quickly learned the new language of the road-- how to read a larger-than-life milk bottle or coffeepot and associate each with a roadside dairy or cafe.

This eye-catching, fantastical commercial building style literally follows the principle that David Gebhard says is an ancient belief of architecture-- "a building should declare its purpose."[14] Ford defines signature architecture as "representational signage"-- instead of a difficult-to-read sign with words advertising a business's wares, the business's building is eye-catchingly designed to represent or suggest what is inside. He notes that signature architecture "allowed small entrepreneurs to call attention to their business while enabling motorists to read the landscape in a hurry." Representational signage was not a twentieth century development-- even in the Middle Ages tailors and jewelers displayed giant scissors and giant watches to draw attention and attract those who could not read. Along the roadside, the issue of legibility was not illiteracy, but the difficulty of reading a sign while traveling at thirty miles per hour or faster.[15] The new roadside businesses of the 1920s combined advertising and architecture into what Chester Liebs calls “an ingenious and unified commercial package.”[16]

During the 1920s and 1930s, there were instances of signature architecture in European countries, but most examples were in the United States, and concentrated on the West Coast.[17] Two elements account for the concentration of signature architecture in southern California--climate and space. The Californian mild climate allowed the use of lightweight stucco that could be easily shaped into unique forms. Land stretching out from Los Angeles was much cheaper and more available than land in urban areas, and no longer inaccessible since the new roads were traveled by many motorists.[18] Another possible factor responsible for the fantastical signature architecture boom in the Los Angeles area is the environment of the Hollywood movie industry.[19] Some buildings, such as the shingle-covered windmills of Van de Kamp’s Bakery, were designed by Henry Oliver, a set designer for MGM studios.[20] The Brown Derby restaurant was built by Hollywood film producer Herbert Somborn in 1926. One story, which may be mythical, is that the building was the result of a boast by Somborn that “if you know anything about food, you can sell it out of a hat.” The Brown Derby was shaped like a bowler hat, twenty-eight feet in diameter, seventeen and a half feet high, and covered with brown stucco.[21]

After the foundations of these networks were laid in the late 1920s, public spending for street-paving and highway construction slowed down.[22] But Americans’ love affair with automobiles did not decline with the Depression. There were more examples of roadside signature architecture built during the beginning of the Great Depression than leading up to it.[23] Some thought the car could resuscitate the economy. Even though automobile production slowed, gasoline was inexpensive, and there were still used cars to be driven. Four billion dollars in federal relief funds went to building highways, roads and streets from 1933 to 1940.[24] These construction projects were one of Franklin D. Roosevelt's attempts to shake the Depression by providing jobs for Americans. In 1936, highway construction projects were given one-seventh of the Works Progress Administration's funds.[25]

The American Roadside began to see real change in the mid-1950s. Margolies attributes the change to the rise of television, corporate chains and franchises, and the interstate highway system.[26] Television helped reinforce "nationwide images of comfort, convenience, and reliability." Corporations learned to "promote a strong, single image." Interstates circumvented the aging commercial strips, leaving the strips without customers.[27] For example, the SS Grand View, built on Route 30 in Central City, Pennsylvania, in 1928,[28] was a very successful ship-shaped hotel and restaurant until the Pennsylvania Turnpike, an early toll interstate, was built in the 1940s and diverted travelers away from Route 30. The building still exists, but it has not been a hotel for over twenty years.[29]

Besides regulations for safety,[30] the commercial strip of the 1920s and 1930s had few zoning regulations and therefore allowed innovation and experimentation in architecture.[31] Modern zoning laws that dictate taste, style, and content have made it nearly impossible to construct new signature architecture.[32] A restriction forbidding building within six hundred feet of the interstate meant that signs would be the only thing visible from the highway. Larger billboards became more important than the buildings, which became indistinguishable except by signs.[33] Venturi notes that even in budgeting, the sign is considered more important than the building: "The sign at the front is a vulgar extravaganza, the building at the back, a modest necessity."[34] If the driver will only see a sign from the interstate, spending money on a building shaped like a hamburger is a frivolity. Ordinances to control signs appeared in the 1970s. Corporations did not fight sign controls, because their national television advertisements already brought in customers. The ordinances meant that the small business owner had less means of attracting customers.[35] In 1977, Susan Del Monte submitted a plan to build a photo shop in the shape of an old-fashioned press camera with pullout bellows to city officials of Westminster, California. The city denied the plan because they did not want to feel like Disneyland. When the design was resubmitted as a standard 35-millimeter camera, the city acquiesced and the Shutter Shak was built.[36] Margolies blames the professional architects and planners for "eliminating the soul, character, and individuality" of the roadside by imposing their values on the environment.[37]

The obsolescence of either the shop or image may have lead to the disappearance of older signature architecture buildings. Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour note that signs become outdated more quickly than a building, not because there is something wrong with the sign, but because competition requires quick changes.[38] If the building is the sign, the building may represent archaic methods of advertising. Schuyt and Elffers believe that buildings shaped like giant ice-cream freezers have "outlive[d] their meaning" because ice cream is no longer churned in a freezer, and is therefore "unrecognizable today to the very youths that it was designed to attract."[39] Although the image of a hand-cranked ice cream freezer is not "unrecognizable" as being related to ice cream, a red Dairy Queen sign works better to scream "ice cream."

Signature architecture has been denounced by several groups. The upper-middle class and professional planners were concerned with the commercialism inherent in the buildings. They were also afraid of losing both the natural environment outside the city and the grand architecture of the city. There was also concern from the world of high art that these sculpted buildings would cheapen sculpture as an art form.[40] After World War II, public opinion agreed with the critics that signature architecture was garish. Many buildings were torn down without consideration, and the construction of new signature architecture buildings became more and more uncommon.

Examining the obstacles that preservationists face may illustrate what methods of preservation are successful and what methods are not. Signature architecture structures are most often threatened for financial reasons. These buildings that were constructed to stimulate profit are now no longer profitable. Usually, they are less valuable then the land they sit on. The original owners may have retired or passed away and the competition from large corporations may be too strong for an independent businessperson. Once the business closes, the building must find alternate uses or face demolition. A Seattle filling station and a Hollywood restaurant are two examples representative of disappearing signature architecture.

In Seattle, two twenty-four foot high cowboy boots made of concrete and steel sat next to a twenty-two foot high cowboy hat with a forty-five foot brim. The Hat n' Boots gas station vanished sometime during the past two years after sitting vacant since 1988. Built in 1947, the boots were rest rooms, the hat was the office, and a six-foot concrete cactus was an air pump for tires.[41] Fifty years after being the Hat n' Boots was built, residents of Seattle's Georgetown neighborhood, wearing cowboy outfits, staged a demonstration to show their support for its preservation. Organizer Kai Schwarz wanted to call attention to the deteriorating state of the abandoned station and planned to file papers to protect the Hat n' Boots with Seattle landmark status. Schwarz and other Georgetown residents wanted to keep the Hat n' Boots in its current location even though the land was for sale. They rejected proposals to move the Hat n' Boots to another neighborhood.[42] In October of 1998, Georgetown residents hoped a plan that would turn the hat into an espresso bar would be successful.[43] Apparently all plans fell through, because results of a "Hat n' Boots" search of the Seattle Times archives only refer to an empty lot and ruins. Previous articles had stated that the owner of the property, Washington State's Department of Natural Resources (DNR), wanted to remove the Hat n' Boots and sell the land. The DNR was not opposed to their preservation and supported the relocation.[44] Schwarz's battle to keep the landmark in the neighborhood rather than moving it may have adversely affected alternate preservation efforts, and lead to the ultimate destruction of this landmark.

Land development also caused significant damage to a classic Californian duck. The original Brown Derby restaurant, the only one of four Brown Derbys to be shaped like a hat, enticed customers with a derby-shaped sign urging "Eat in a Hat."[45] Built in 1926, movie stars frequented the eatery on Wilshire Boulevard, but by the 1930s the other Brown Derby locations were attracting more stars.[46] The original Derby closed in 1980 and was slated for demolition to make way for a shopping center. When Marion Gibbons, founder of the nonprofit preservation group Hollywood Heritage, found out about the demolition, she passed through protesters and crossed police barricades to reach the owner. She asked the owner to save the hat. The owner incredulously repeated her request, and when he understood that Gibbons was only asking for the outer shell of the hat to be preserved, he agreed.[47] The hat was removed in May 1985 to be restored,[48] and was installed on the second story of a mini-mall at the Derby's original location, taking a back seat to a fast-food restaurant.[49] In 1989, the Derby enclosed a Filipino seafood restaurant.[50] More recently, the Derby was painted silver and housed a higher-end cocktail bar.[51] Gibbons approached preservation realistically— preserving all or part of a building should be financially sensible.[52] Saving the hat can be considered a victory for preservationists, but the current treatment of this landmark makes the victory bittersweet.

Growing preservation movements sponsored by non-profit organizations or the federal government are supported by architects Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour's acknowledgment of the importance and uniqueness of signature architecture. Founded in 1976, the Society of Commercial Archeology is the oldest national organization for promoting the preservation of roadside commercial architecture. The SCA works to encourage preservation through advocacy, public awareness, documentation and education.[53] The SCA saved Mammy's Cupboard, a gas station built in 1939 in the stereotypical form of a black woman. It was slated for destruction due to a roadwork project in Natchez, Mississippi.[54] The National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP) is a private, nonprofit organization that, as its mission statement declares, is "dedicated to protecting the irreplaceable." Through education and advocacy, it "fights to save historic buildings and the neighborhoods and landscapes they anchor."[55] The federal government's National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 created the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). The National Park Service oversees this list of America's historical and cultural resources that should be preserved. Properties on the NRHP have been deemed significant to American history, architecture, archeology, engineering and culture by meeting a list of guidelines. Simply being listed on the NRHP does not guarantee preservation. The list gives a building national recognition and offers tax incentives for rehabilitation.[56]

The relative ease of saving the big Duck illustrates how successful preservation efforts on a local level can be. In 1987, the land on which the Long Island Big Duck sat was purchased by developers. The forty-six year old duck-shaped building fortunately did not have to prove its importance. The Big Duck was already well-known as the "unofficial symbol" of Suffolk County[57] and the namesake of duck architecture. The history of Long Island's Big Duck has been well-documented in a comprehensive pamphlet by The Friends for Long Island's Heritage.

Peking duck has been a Long Island specialty since the late 1800s. Martin Maurer, an enterprising duck farmer, had an idea to build a giant shop shaped like a duck to attract customers in cars. He was inspired by a California coffee shop shaped like a giant coffeepot. In 1931, Maurer hired carpenter George Reeve and brothers William and Samuel Collins, both stage show set designers, to design and construct the Big Duck. The wooden framework of the twenty-foot high, thirty-foot long, 16,500 pound Duck is covered by a wire mesh to which the cement was applied. The brightly-painted white Duck has a beak painted the color of orange street-lines, and its eyes glow the red of two Model-T taillights.[58] The new automobile culture not only created the need for an eye-catching gimmick, but also provided some of the materials for the Big Duck's structure.

According to Richard Martin, the director of Historic Services for Long Island's Suffolk County Parks in New York, when word got out that the Duck was endangered, the community was very supportive. Helpful owners, concerned citizens, and a responsive county government all played crucial roles in preserving the best example of "duck" architecture. Martin explained that even though the owners sold the property for development, they were concerned about the fate of the Big Duck. Kia and Pouran Eshghi originally purchased the duck farm specifically for the duck-shaped building. Kia, a sculptor, hoped to build more duck-shaped buildings, but his plans did not pan out, and the Eshghis sold the land to developers in 1987. In December 1987, the Eshghis donated the Big Duck to Suffolk County. One financial benefit for the owners was the tax write-off such a large donation provided. Because the building needed to be relocated, a local moving company donated their services. Friends for Long Island's Heritage (FLIH), a not-for-profit organization which now operates a gift shop inside the Big Duck, held fundraisers to pay for the $30,000 refurbishment. The restoration work included strengthening the Duck's foundation and restoring the original flooring and walls. The proceeds from gift shop sales help to maintain the building. Once a year, Suffolk County gives its “unofficial symbol” a fresh coat of paint.[59]

The Big Duck advertised a shop that sold live ducks for cooking. Most Americans no longer go to a duck store to prepare for a meal. At the time the Big Duck was donated to Suffolk County, prepared take-home duck was sold there. Now, the Big Duck houses a gift shop. The Big Duck has lost its original meaning because what it is advertising is no longer relevant--buying cooked duck is not the first thing to come to mind when driving past. Alternate functions for the Duck would be hard to imagine if it had not been embraced by the citizens of Suffolk County. The Big Duck was preserved not just because of the nostalgic feelings of Long Island’s citizens. The Duck survived because it is deeply rooted in the history of Long Island, representing the agricultural economy that has grown smaller over the years, and the history of America, representing the entrepreneurial spirit of the American businessperson.

SCA President Daniel Hershberger points out that a major difficulty with finding significance in newer buildings is that if a building has not stood the test of time, it is hard to differentiate between nostalgia and history. Significance is not solely in the age of a building--just because something is old, it is not necessarily significant.[60] Although the National Trust’s mission statement does not specify it, NTHP President Richard Moe implies that age is significant factor by giving reasons for the preservation of “old” buildings. He says four reasons “old” buildings should be preserved are for beauty, reuse, tourism and memory.[61] Determining when a building is “old”may be a major obstacle in preserving buildings from the twentieth century. The United States government has officially limited a property’s importance by age--

properties less than fifty years old are not considered eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.[62]

If a property is found to be significantly important, exceptions can be made to the NRHP's fifty-year rule. In 1979, the National Park Service published a bulletin of guidelines for evaluating properties that may be worthy of preservation, but only attained importance within the last fifty years. This bulletin points out that the fifty year period is "an arbitrary span of time, designed as a filter to ensure that enough time has passed to evaluate the property in a historic context." Without this filter of time, it is hard to objectively evaluate the historical relevance of a contemporary property.[63] Just because a building is not yet fifty years old, does not mean it is not significant. Fifty years may not be needed to observe the importance of a property. A thirty-eight year old building that meets the National Register's guidelines for significance could be more historically important than a seventy-five year old building that does not meet the criteria. The age limit may discourage some preservationists from obtaining National Register status for a newer building, but if the property is exceptionally important, the age will not be the determining factor.

A current struggle to preserve San Francisco's Giant Camera demonstrates the difficulty in proving significance for a building that is not fifty years old. In 1946, Floyd Jennings built a camera obscura as part of an amusement park called Playland-at-the-Beach. The original 20 x 20 foot wood frame building sheltering Jennings' camera obscura, a mechanism that projects images of the outside world on a parabolic disc, had a nautical theme resembling a small boxy ship. Visible from Ocean Highway, the Giant Camera stands on the observation deck behind the Cliff House, overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Around 1957, George K. Whitney, the owner of Playland and the Cliff House, suggested changing the outside of the Giant Camera to a more attention-getting design. The new construction resembles a giant camera-- with two large film-advancing knobs and a Kodak-inspired yellow and blue paint job.[64]

In February 1999, Joe Durrance, a tourist from Philadelphia, paid the one-dollar admission fee to visit the Jennings' Giant Camera. Inside, a rotating 360-degree view of the Pacific Ocean, Seal Rocks and the Cliff House is projected on a parabolic disc six feet in diameter. He discovered that the land owner, the National Park Service, did not plan to renew the lease when it expired January 1, 2000. Upon returning to Philadelphia, Durrance investigated and learned that the National Park Service had plans to renovate the Cliff House area, and the Giant Camera was not included. The NPS had even allowed for the construction of a camera obscura on top of the soon-to-be restored Cliff House, essentially destroying the Giant Camera building, and taking the business away from its current owner and giving it to the Cliff House concessionaires. Even though he was on the other side of the country, Durrance decided to start a campaign to save the Giant Camera.

First, Durrance made contact with other camera obscura, pinhole photography and Playland at the Beach enthusiasts. He found these allies by searching the Internet. He spoke with Giant Camera owner Robert Tacchetto and realized that he needed help dealing with the National Park Service. He then contacted the proper authorities at the NPS to find out exactly what their plans were and to voice his concern about the possible loss of this San Francisco landmark. Durrance compiled his findings on his newly created Save the Camera website. He listed addresses for concerned citizens to contact the NPS and provided detailed updates. Durrance contacted the National Trust for Historic Preservation and prompted a news item in the NTHP's magazine *Preservation*. An article about Playland-at-the-Beach in *Retro*, an online popular culture magazine, featured the predicament of the Giant Camera. A chain email petition launched in June 1999 spread the word even further-- there were signers as far away as Australia and Finland.

Although the chain email was difficult to track and received some negative response from those questioning the efficiency of chain emails, the result of the petition was immediately evident-- a front page article in the *San Francisco Examiner*. The *Examiner* article alerted more San Francisco area residents to the Giant Camera's plight and introduced Durrance to a much-needed partner on the West Coast. Living on the East Coast, Durrance was becoming frustrated with the difficulties of encouraging the public and making the right contacts with the NPS. Bay Area resident Tom Roop contacted Durrance the day the *Examiner* article was published. Roop became the West Coast voice of the Friends of the Giant Camera by writing letters to city government, the NPS, and attending public meetings. The San Francisco Board of Supervisors passed a resolution adopting the Friends of the Giant Camera's slogan-- that the Camera must stay "As It Is-- Where It Is." As the end-of-the-year deadline approached, the NPS extended the Giant Camera's lease.

In February, Stephen Haller, the Park Historian of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, was completing a nomination for the Sutro Historic Landscape District to be named to the National Register of Historic Places. The Giant Camera is included in this district which includes the Cliff House and the ruins of the Sutro Baths. While looking over the nomination, the Friends of the Giant Camera noticed that the section detailing the importance of the Camera only cited the machinery of the camera obscura and not the building itself. The nomination strictly adheres to the fifty-year rule. Because the mechanism was built in 1946, it is worthy of being preserved. But, according to the NPS, the forty-three year old building is not.[65] The nomination states, "The significance of this building is the function and equipment of the camera obscura and not the architectural design of the building housing the camera obscura."[66]

Durrance and the Friends of the Giant Camera researched the four criteria of the National Register of Historic Places: the property can be associated with events significant to United States history; the property can be associated with a significant person; the property can typify a distinctive style, represent the work of a master, or possess high artistic values; or the property has produced or may produce information important in prehistory or history.[67] They created a Significance Statement claiming significance under the first three criteria:

> The Jennings Giant Camera possesses significance under NRHP:
>
> Criterion A because of its perpetuation of and contributions to the history and craft of camera obscuras and photography in the United States and its association with the history of recreation in the United States during the 20th Century;
>
> Criterion B because of its association with Floyd Jennings and George Whitney, two significant people in the Sutro Historic District;
>
> Criterion C because it represents the last surviving camera obscura in a body of work built by Floyd Jennings and because the building is a classic example of signature or "duck" architecture.[68]

Durrance sought the support of architects Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour. Their letter recommending the preservation and restoration of the Giant Camera was sent directly to Park Historian Haller. Camera obscura expert Beverly Wilgus also wrote a letter of support. Roop presented the Significance Statement to Haller on February 24, 2000, and convinced the NPS to include the Giant Camera's structure as an integral part of the Sutro Historic District.[69]

Individual preservation attempts may not be as successful as collaborative efforts. Near York, Pennsylvania, the spectacle of a giant shoe is now overwhelmed by encroaching sprawl.

The Shoe House in Hallam, Pennsylvania, was built in the late 1940s as a promotional gimmick by Mahlon Haines, a flamboyant shoe store entrepreneur who called himself "the Shoe Wizard." Built on a hillside for maximum visibility from the road, the white stucco house was modeled after one of Haines' most popular shoes-- a man's work boot-- and each stained-glass window has a shoe motif. Haines lent the house to honeymooning couples at no charge for publicity. After he died in 1962, the house was owned by an orthodontist who gave tours and sold ice cream from the instep. In 1987, Haines' granddaughter, Annie Haines Keller, bought the Shoe House for $67,500 and spent more than $40,000 restoring the house. Keller and her husband did most of the restoration themselves because contractors would not seriously consider the work. They planned to open a bed-and-breakfast and ice cream parlor in the shoe in 1990,[70] but that venture was unsuccessful. After restoring the building, Keller tried to sell the Shoe House, but in 1995, the bank foreclosed and the Shoe House was sold to a woman who conducts tours of the shoe-themed attraction. Route 30 still passes by the Shoe House, but it is now a four-lane highway with no local exit.[71] If the Shoe House is unable to make a profit because tourists are unable to see it, the house's future is not secure. Even with caring owners like Annie Haines Keller, the Shoe House was not safe.

A blueprint to saving signature architecture is not available because there have not been great victories. Many buildings were lost years before preserving them would be considered. Although preserving the Big Duck did not meet with opposition, the cooperation of owners, community members and the local government to raise money, and make land available is the lesson of the Duck's success. The Giant Camera met with much opposition from the National Park Service, ironically the same organization that oversees the National Register of Historic Places. The new technology of the Internet was crucial in getting a group of like-minded individuals together. The email petition and the Save the Camera website helped notify people who might otherwise have heard of the Camera only after its demise. These people then wrote letters to key officials like the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, and the historian of the NPS. The persistence of the Friends of the Giant Camera finally forced the National Park Service to reconsider their plans to remove the Camera. The Giant Camera will be added to the National Register of Historic Places, but preservationists must be vigilant, since the NRHP does not guarantee preservation.[72]

Gimmicks from the classic period of signature architecture are starting to reappear, not on the roadside, but inside shopping malls. A chain restaurant with a rainforest fantasy theme uses some of the same attention-getting techniques-- a jungle setting with a giant gorilla beckoning the consumer inside. Although this restaurant is a corporate chain and not an individual vision, the appeal of its unusual setting may indicate that Americans are ready for more creative consuming and promotion. The large boxy chain stores and cookie-cutter fast food restaurants have dulled the landscape long enough. Since the economic climate favors chains, maybe the next trip down the road could see a giant Starbuck's coffee cup or a Taco Bell in the shape of the Taco Bell dog. A higher level of appreciation for the surviving icons of roadside architecture can at the very least mean that the endangerment of "ducks" will not go unnoticed, and possibly lead to their preservation.

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