



TENDERLOIN NEON SPECIAL SIGN DISTRICT



Photo by SF Planning

Neon signage is integral to the history and character of the Tenderloin. These vibrant, hand-crafted signs represent the largest concentration of neon in the City. Recent legislation encourages the preservation and restoration of existing signs and addition of new signage. The following standards provide requirements for existing and new neon signage within the North of Market Residential Special Use District as shown on Sectional Map No. SU01 of the Zoning Map

I. Existing Signage Repair and Restoration

Repair and restoration of neon signage shall follow industry best practices. See *Appendix A* checklist courtesy of Neon Speaks for requirements.

II. New Signage

Content

- » Sign must have neon graphics on both sides of projecting signs
- » Signs may contain up to three of the following graphics:
 - Business name
 - Business logo or slogan
 - Animated feature
 - Product or services
- » Signs shall not contain brand names

Neon Sign Types:



Projecting Sign



Wall Sign

Placement

Projecting signs

- » Sign must be mounted above the ground floor
- » Top of sign must not project above roof line or cornice
- » Signs may be placed at the building corner or on facade adjacent to lobby
- » Mounting hardware must be attached to the primary cladding material and not require the

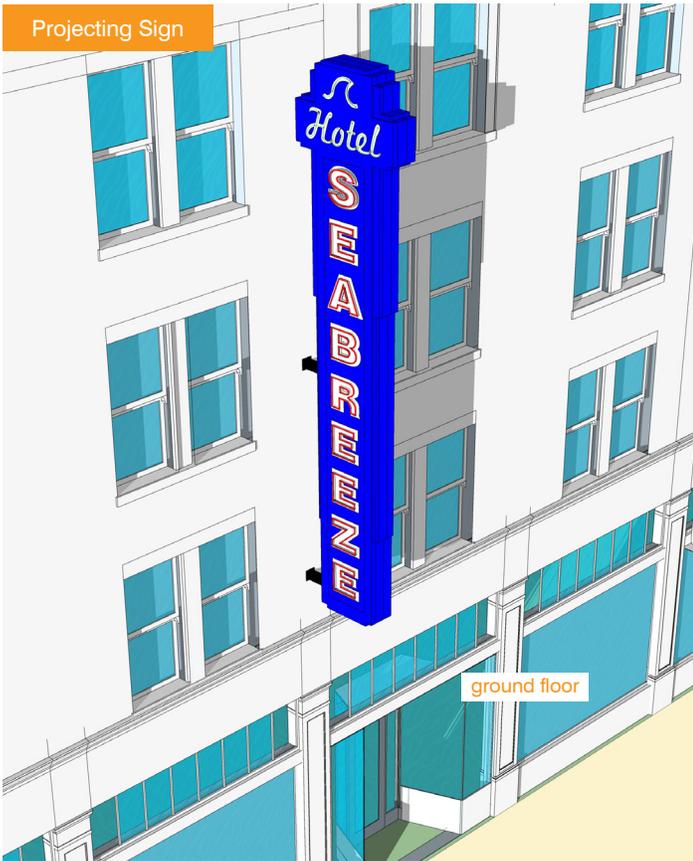
removal or alteration of detail/ornamentation

Wall signs

- » Signs must be mounted on a flat surface of the building and not require the removal or alteration of detail/ornamentation
- » Signage with sign cans must not be placed in front of clerestory/transom windows if they obscure more than 50% of the windows.
- » Individual open face/channel letters mounted from the bottom with no backing may be placed in front of clerestory/transom windows

Mechanical

- » Electrical elements including conduits, transformers, junction boxes, end caps, and panels shall be concealed inside the sign's metal cabinet or in a water-tight box. Raceways shall not be used.



New projecting signs shall be placed above the ground floor and not extend above the roofline.



New wall signs must be mounted on a flat surface of the building and must not block more than 50% of any clerestory/transome window.



TIP: Light background letters with a contrasting dark sign can create legibility during the day.



TIP: Individual open face/channel letters minimize obstruction to architectural details.



TIP: Capital block letterforms are highly legible and stand out when outlined in neon.



NEON BEST PRACTICES CHECKLIST

This checklist is a summary of the best practices in this guidebook. As you embark on a project to save a neon sign in your neighborhood, use this list as a starting point to set expectations for best practices with your sign contractor. Include the details of this checklist in your contract or bid request. It is a great way to let sign experts know that materials and details matter to you. Communicate that you expect best practices for the longevity of the sign!

- ❑ **Support:** Contact neonspeaks@gmail.com for support, questions, free consultations, resources, or to request a free PDF version of this guidebook.
- ❑ **LED vs. Neon:** Do not confuse LED products marketed as neon with neon glass neon tubes. LEDs are made of plastic and end up in the landfill after a few years. Neon glass tubes last for decades and use little electricity. The historic integrity of a vintage sign is destroyed if the neon glass tubes are replaced with LEDs.
- ❑ **Pigeon abatement/cleaning:** Pigeon droppings are very damaging to a neon sign. Do an inspection and if pigeon guano is evident, the budget and schedule should be increased to include power washing, damage repair, and bird control products/deterrents. If there is no pigeon damage, vacuum the inside of the sign, hand wash the sign inside and out with a mild detergent, rinse, and dry.
- ❑ **Porcelain enamel signs:** Clean stains and all rust spots. Replace rusted screws carefully so the glass does not crack. Treat all chips and exposed metal with an anti-rust product POR-15, then paint to match porcelain colors. Buff, wax, and polish the porcelain sign faces. Never drill new holes—the porcelain may crack. Most porcelain signs retain vivid colors and should never need to be painted unless severely damaged. The painted spine or return of the sign should be painted to match the original color.
- ❑ **Wire/transformers:** Install ground wire if missing. Old secondary wiring should be replaced with gas tube only (GTO) wire by an experienced and qualified contractor. Replace non-working transformers with new electromagnetic transformers rated for outdoors at same voltage. Never place transformers on the outside or leave unused transformers inside the metal cabinet. Replace transformer shelving if deteriorated. Install a service timer for energy conservation and another service switch on the sign for safety. Never use pull-chain transformers.
- ❑ **Connections/rubber boots:** Most vintage neon signs are engineered using ceramic or glass housings that allow the electrical connections to be made inside the sign cabinet. It is essential to maintain the electrical connections in this original configuration. Do not use rubber boots (also called end caps) for a repair or to re-engineer a neon tube with double-backed electrodes. Wire connections should not be external to the sign. External wires degrade the historical integrity of the sign and clutter the visual field of the original sign image.
- ❑ **Glass housings/holes:** Replace old or missing glass housings for all original housing holes in the sign. Use original holes even if the sign is redesigned. Never drill new holes or use bushings (non-traditional housings that are smaller in diameter). Never run wire from the housing hole to a rubber boot or end cap.
- ❑ **Tube supports:** Replace all original tube supports (also called spacers or standoffs) that are missing or broken. Tube supports are mounted on the sign and wired to the glass tubes in order to hold the tubes in place, away from the face of the sign. Use glass tube supports and stainless steel screws that are rust resistant.
- ❑ **Structural supports:** Inspect and repair anchor points, steel cables, turn buckles, and angle iron supports that attach the sign to the building. Engineering drawings will be required if you are permitted to take a sign down to restore it. New, stronger structural supports will be required for the re-installation.
- ❑ **Metal cabinet:** Repair structural damage, remove and repair rust damage. If pigeons have been nesting in the cabinet, pigeon debris cleaning will be a necessary part of restoration and will add time and cost to the project. Weep holes should be cleared and access panels repaired and sealed after restoration to keep out water, dirt, and pigeons. Never “skin” the sign by adding new metal on top of the original sign.
- ❑ **Paint:** Sand the old paint to reveal any layers of older lettering, and photograph it for historical documentation. Scrape or use chemical paint stripper to remove old paint to uncover the bare metal of the sign and prep for painting. Paint is the best way to protect a metal sign. Use a metal primer and at least two coats of paint. No vinyl lettering! Match original colors as closely as possible using actual paint samples. Insist on sign-specific or automotive grade paint. One-Shot and/or Matthews are sign-specific paints perfect for hand lettering. Always use paint that is graded for outdoors.
- ❑ **Paper pattern:** Create a paper pattern that traces the actual size of the design/letter forms and the original housing holes in the sign. A detailed pattern is essential to ensure that glass tubes: 1) accurately recreate the original design of the sign; and 2) are bent at a 90-degree angle to fit inside the original housing holes.
- ❑ **Glass tubes:** Replace broken glass tubes. Keep original tubes if they are in good condition and color can be matched. Bend glass tubes to match paper pattern to accurately recreate the original design. Tube ends should be bent at a 90-degree angle to fit perfectly in the original housing holes. Never run wire from the housing hole to an electrode or through a rubber boot or end cap.
- ❑ **Insurance/avoidable damage:** Every care should be given to the fragile nature of a neon sign. The sign shop should be insured and accept responsibility for avoidable damage to the sign during any stage of the restoration.
- ❑ **Warranty:** Include a one-year warranty on all labor and materials for a repaired or restored neon sign. For repairs, specify exactly which side and the particular letters/decorative parts of the sign were repaired under warranty. Hail storms are tough on neon tubes, and warranties generally exclude hail or weather damage.
- ❑ **Maintenance and repair:** Establish a plan with funds and a budget for regular maintenance and repair.
- ❑ **Documentation and conservation:** Create a survey to document the surviving neon signs in your area. Include photographs of the signs before, after, and during restoration. Save porcelain housings or donate them to a neon museum for future restorations.