



Your complimentary use period has ended.
Thank you for using PDF Complete.

[Click Here to upgrade to Unlimited Pages and Expanded Features](#)

[send to printer](#)

September 9-15, 2004

CITYSPACE

Defining the City's Image



A GRITTY PALETTE: When it comes to making cities stand out in a crowd, it doesn't always take monuments. Sometimes, even graffiti does the trick. Photo By: Michael T. Regan

Keep your phone booths, London. Philadelphia can establish landmarks out of everyday objects.

by Joshua Markel

When people think about great cities, architecture and cultural amenities are often what first come to mind. But usually lurking behind a sense of urban excellence is an almost unconscious feeling about the streetscape. Perhaps it is the blend of materials, the stone work or paving patterns. Maybe it's the way the lampposts and kiosks work together like the furniture in a well-designed room.

Just as a well-designed room might be memorable because of a particular chair or desk, great places are often remembered by certain iconic objects like London's red telephone booths, San Francisco's cable cars and Paris' Metro stops. It is tempting to

add one-of-a-kind objects such as the Eiffel Tower or Philadelphia's *Clothespin* statue to such a list, but that's like looking at a beautiful brooch and ignoring the dress. In the end, the humbler benches, sewer grates and paving have a more pervasive effect on our perception of place.

The role of the designer in making these objects is complicated. While the product of graffiti writers is clearly their own, how does a community come to feel ownership and identification with a designed object? Or, to flip the question on its head, how does a designer create objects that help define a community's identity?

Historically, this has occurred by a kind of natural selection process. London's red telephone booths weren't meant to be signature objects. Designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott to celebrate the coronation of George VI, these were practical, omnipresent little shelters with character that stayed around long enough for the public to embrace them.

Paris held a competition to select the designer for its Metro stops, but when the competition director wasn't pleased with the results, he put all entries aside in favor of French art nouveau architect Hector Guimard, who produced a kit of cast parts, from which could be assembled a variety of different layouts sharing the same style. To this day, his Metro stops each look like custom-built objects, even though they are not.


Both London's telephone booths and Paris' Metro stops were the objects of enough affection that they survived successive waves of change and rebuilding. They endured and became indelibly identified with their places. The designers didn't set out to create urban icons, but cultural history bestowed that honor upon them. That's not to say that designers can't be successful in consciously creating place identity from the start.

Like it or not, Disney World was a tremendously successful example of this phenomenon. Though it gained much of its recognition from objects that had already built recognition for decades — such as Mickey's ears, Disney's attempt to cash in on the stylistic cues of small-town America didn't work quite so successfully when they attempted to build the real town of Celebration, Fla., which it is now trying to unload.

If self-consciously generating new signature urban objects is a risky but worthwhile venture, it needn't be an expensive one. The lighting that defines Boathouse Row was an instant, relatively cheap way of branding the city. Billings, Mont., created tree grates from old horseshoes welded together. (Sure it's corny and cheap, but it works.)

In thinking about Philadelphia, it is illuminating to consider the city as measured by the yardstick of signature objects of which the city has no strong ones — just as some might argue that it has no strong image. There are the fire company medallions (from the bad old days of privatized public services) that owners placed on their colonial-era homes so you could watch with self-righteous glee as the properties of the uninsured and unprotected burned to the ground.

In the modern era, there are some candidates for signature urban objects in the making. One would surely be the city's murals. Though, like much else about Philadelphia, they are a mixed blessing, as they in some sense advertise torn places in the urban fabric in need of mending. Isaiah Zagar's mirror-and-tile mosaic facades also aspire to signature urban-object status, as do Joel Katz's way-finding signs.




Your complimentary use period has ended. Thank you for using PDF Complete.

Click Here to upgrade to Unlimited Pages and Expanded Features

street furniture presents itself, Philadelphia suffers from a reflexive few 19th-century lampposts that send the message that we were a

Objects Project, which will host a conference at the University of the Arts on Oct. 15-16. For more information, see www.signatureurbanobjects.org.

 — Respond to this article in our Forums — [click](#) to jump there