

# Ad or Subtraction?

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## Supergraphics Good Signs for Traffic-Snarled Car Culture

By JEFFREY C. BRIGGS

A false assumption underlies the Los Angeles City Council's recent efforts to limit billboards and mural-sized "supergraphics" on the sides of buildings — namely, that a majority of Angelenos dislike billboard advertising.

While council members no doubt receive more negative than positive comments from constituents about billboards, that does not mean that those of us who don't bother to say anything in favor of such signage are against it.

I, for one, love billboards. I think "supergraphics" and electronic billboards represent one of the great artistic movements of this young century. Preservationists and architectural historians who say our city is "blighted" by billboards — many of whom also seem to

### TWO VIEWS

The 9th Circuit Court of Appeals this month upheld L.A.'s 2002 citywide outdoor advertising ban, giving the city much more power to regulate billboards. State lawmakers also have proposed a moratorium in electronic billboards in the state. Here are two views on the billboard issue.

pine for the days of horse-drawn carts on Hollywood Boulevard — may be making the most noise, but government officials should act with great care when presuming to favor one aesthetic sensibility over another.

Billboards should be beloved in a city where gridlock rules the road. Better we learn about new products and services, improved old ones, and the occasional public service message, than try to study the local (and frequently barren) architecture while "driving." So maybe I don't know art deco from beaux arts and should, but until I go back to school for an art history course, give me movie and fashion ads any day while I wait for the seventh time for a light to change.

From what I have seen, most of the buildings wrapped in big ads are a lot more interesting now than they were in their "historic" state. In fact, I bet I know more buildings in our fair city from their supergraphics than I know from their place in architectural history.

Furthermore, we do live in a city. It is spread out, but greater Los Angeles remains fundamentally an urban environment, and that means population and building density. Until we do like the Irish and hand out different paint colors to property owners to give a brighter palette to our city streets, billboards do that for us — and not at taxpayer expense.

### Genetic predisposition

Moreover, our city is in America. Most of us expect to receive messages appealing to the consumer desire residing in our DNA, or else PBS would be a Nielsen ratings killer. I wouldn't want to see billboards all over Florence, Italy — but Florence is, well, Florence, and ... well, we are not.

I am fine with pretending to know my Corinthian from my Doric columns when in Europe, but this is Los Angeles, and I expect to see movie, TV and music ads everywhere, the larger the better. I bet Florentines who visit here feel the same way, especially when in an area like Hollywood.

Imagine Times Square without flashing neon — what are Hollywood and Sunset boulevards without their supergraphics?

The argument that billboards are distract-

ing to drivers is a canard. We Angelenos are more "parkers" than "drivers," and in gridlock we need distractions to keep ourselves from driving on the sidewalks out of abject frustration. Besides, in terms of potential distraction, how much different is a shopkeeper's sign over his door from a billboard ad on top of his roof? The whole point of signage is to "distract" one into coming in off the street. Are we really going to tell shopkeepers that they can't put a sign up large enough to be read by a driver gridlocked in front of their stores? And if we are not, then why pick on one kind of sign and not another? (There is a First Amendment argument lurking in here as well, but we

Americans don't seem to be very afraid of slippery slopes.)

I actually trust property owners to not wrap iconic buildings like the Century Plaza Hotel in advertising (though again, I personally wouldn't be offended; and maybe the new owners want to tear it down just so they can design new space for supergraphics). I also trust the city not to wrap City Hall or Griffith Observatory (though maybe that is a better way to raise revenue than to double the parking meter rates). What I don't trust is anyone in government telling me what is an aesthetically better approach.

If our City Council members want to ban billboards, they should put it on a ballot and let majority rule. But until then, my advice is that the silent majority's aesthetic sensibilities are as valid as those few who cry "blight." Sometimes the squeakiest wheel simply doesn't deserve any grease — at least not from government.

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