

2012 GOVERNOR'S HISTORIC PRESERVATION AWARDS

Relighting the Historic Signs of Figueroa Street



The historic rooftop sign of the Highland Theatre, Figueroa Street, Los Angeles

The North Figueroa Association decided to start a Historic Route 66 signage district by restoring and relighting two old rooftop signs badly in need of repair. Because Figueroa Street served as US Route 66 from 1931 to '34 and 66A from 1936 to 1960, the signage project was a perfect way to reintroduce Route 66 to the City of Los Angeles. The signs are located in the Highland Park-Garvanza Historic Preservation Overlay Zone in one of LA's distinct historic communities.

Both signs underwent local review with the City of Los Angeles through the Office of Historic Resources and the Board of the Highland Park-Garvanza HPOZ after receiving a Section 106 review (because of funding from the National Park Service). The project brought together many seemingly disparate elements: a community passionate about place and willing to push the boundaries of historic preservation; a business district's desire to create a more attractive, distinctive destination to generate retail interest; and advocates for Route 66, neon, old signs and vernacular roadside architecture. This neighborhood effort exemplifies a new and innovative way that historic preservation—on a large or small scale—can be a vital strategy for community revitalization.

Constructed in 1936, the Manning's Coffee Store sign was moved to Highland Park from Hollywood that same year. Today it is the sole Manning's sign left in the City of LA. The sign itself uses a rare combination of neon and opal glass letters. The original 22 opal glass letters had been stolen but were recovered through the historic sign aficionado network via the LA Museum of Neon Art. Work on the sign was funded by leveraging grants from the NPS Route 66 Corridor Preservation cost-share grant program and the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Los Angeles County Preservation grant program, along with community fundraising.

Highland Theatre, a Moorish-style building designated a Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument, was designed in 1924 by noted architect Lewis A. Smith. The iconic rooftop sign is perhaps Highland Park's most visible and beloved symbol due to its size (over 25 feet) and its commanding presence atop the tallest building on the street. Preservation was accomplished by a young local electrician rewiring the entire sign and replacing every one of its 502 incandescent bulbs. The cost-share grant from NPS required a 1:1 local match, so project leaders started by asking supporters to sponsor a single bulb for \$19.24. Instead, community organizations wanted to participate on a grander scale and stepped forward to sponsor an entire letter—15 in all.

Learn more about the preservation efforts of the historic Route 66 signs as well as the history of the businesses with which they were originally associated:

<http://futurestudio.typepad.com/files/aboutrelightinghproject.pdf>