A Sign Sampler

Here are some examples (not all exemplary) of signs in cities, as a reference for discussion.

The black-and-white photographs by Nishan Bichajian are drawn from work commissioned by Kevin Lynch and Gyorgy Kepes at MIT in the 1950s and available at http://dome.mit.edu/handle/1721.3/33655.

A range of signs.

From the top down:
- State highway directional sign.
- Cast stone building identification above second-story windows.
- Projecting sign for optometrist’s office at second-floor sill.
- Blade sign in the shape of a book.
- At drug store, neon signs, projecting and flat; painted fascia sign; painted sign on glass; lighted perfume sign in window; painted and paper signs on door.
- Parking regulation signs at curb.
Size

Signs should be big enough
so that the viewer, from some distance (and perhaps at some speed of travel) can
identify the sign as a sign, and possibly as a sign of a given type, and
receive the message on the sign (through shape, color, lettering).

Signs should not be too big
so that they do not obscure one another,
obscure or confuse the cityscape,
obstruct other functions (like seeing out of a building), or
become structurally cumbersome or unsound.

On this page: billboards and billboard-sized signs from Cambridge and Boston.
Signs as dominant, buildings as background. Signs of this size preclude transparency: no views in or out.

Signs at upper floors.

At left: Building as sign.
Above: Big signs, visible from some distance, ostensibly as landmarks and way-finding aids.

At right: Tiny identifying plaque on a landmark department store. The place is recognizable because of its architecture rather than its signage.
Form

Signs are sometimes the most carefully rendered details of a building.
There’s a long history of three-dimensional signs. These 3D “cartoons” have a cheerful directness, often rendering familiar objects at outlandish size, and offering information and amusement even to preschoolers.
Location

With respect to the public way: on, overhanging, or simply visible from.
Height: as a function of viewing distance of users
Relationship to building elements: obstructing, casting light into windows; associated with entrances
Relationship to one another: obstructing, establishing a family of multiple similar objects
Particular use-associations, eg theater and hotel marquees.
BROADWAY, CAMBRIDGE, MA
window as billboard

PORTLAND & MAIN ST., CAMBRIDGE, MA
7-11 windows obscured by frosting and signs

CHAMBERS ST., BOSTON, MA
window displaying merchandise and interior, with neon and painted signs

BROADWAY, CAMBRIDGE, MA
flat panel display screens in Microsoft lobby

KOCH INSTITUTE, MIT, MAIN ST., CAMBRIDGE, MA
backlit photographs in lobby
Use

In addition to advertising, signs can identify, educate, amuse, and direct.
Boylston St., Boston, MA
Freestanding clock establishes semi-public zone between sidewalk and storefront. (photo by Nishan Bichajian / MIT Perceptual Form of the City series)

Boston Bricks, Winthrop La., Boston, MA
pavement inset “you are here” (Kate Burke & Gregg LeFebvre)

Main St., Cambridge, MA
plaque commemorating the first phone call

Weybosset St., Providence, RI
Westminster Arcade

Albion, RI
bridge builder’s identification plate

238 Main St., Cambridge, MA
Kendall Square Building clock tower

Boynton St., Boston, MA
Freestanding clock establishes semi-public zone between sidewalk and storefront. (photo by Nishan Bichajian / MIT Perceptual Form of the City series)

Town Hall, Marktgasse, Bern, Switzerland
the mechanical clock that inspired Einstein
Regulatory and wayfinding signs rely on uniform and predictable forms to set them apart from commercial signs and to identify them as members of functional groups (e.g., octagonal red “Stop” signs).

Examples at right show regulatory signs in need of improvement. Particularly egregious are the back-to-back signs identifying the traffic signal number: contrast with the discreet yellow adhesive label identifying the light standard on which the signal signs are hung. These signs are ubiquitous and numerous, and their collective presence does make a difference. They would benefit from better design.