

SAVING HISTORIC & VINTAGE SIGNS

Best Practices
Regulating These
Community Icons

JAMES CARPENTIER, AICP





James Carpentier, AICP, is the Director of State and Local Government Affairs with the International Sign Association (ISA). James works with local officials and planners in the creation of effective and enforceable sign regulations and is a frequent speaker and author on sign regulatory issues. He has helped communities develop historic sign codes and has spoken on the issue of historic sign regulations at national and regional APA events.

Published by:
Sign Research Foundation
January 2022

Historic and vintage signs can rekindle fond memories of the past that bring us to a time and place when nearly all businesses were locally owned shops on Main Street, USA. These signs represented a one-of-a-kind piece of nostalgia and art, as vivid as a neon landmark.

“Signs speak of the people who run the businesses, shops, and firms. Signs are signatures. They reflect the owner's tastes and personality. They often reflect the ethnic makeup of a neighborhood and its character, as well as the social and business activities carried out there. By giving concrete details about daily life in a former era, historic signs allow the past to speak to the present in ways that buildings by themselves do not. And multiple surviving historic signs on the same building can indicate several periods in its history or use. In this respect, signs are like archeological layers that reveal different periods of human occupancy and use. Historic signs give continuity to public spaces, becoming part of the community memory. They sometimes become landmarks in themselves, almost without regard for the building to which they are attached, or the property on which they stand. Furthermore, in an age of uniform franchise signs and generic plastic ‘box’ signs, historic signs often attract by their individuality: by a clever detail, a daring use of color and motion, or a reference to particular people, shops, or events.”

—Michael Auer, *The Preservation of Historic Signs*

100,000 CONSUMERS WERE POLLED IN 50 STATES, AND 77% AGREED WITH THE STATEMENT THAT “VINTAGE SIGNS ARE WORTH PRESERVING.”

—James Kellaris, Professor at the University of Cincinnati, author of the 2012 *BrandSpark Better Homes and Gardens American Shopper Survey* (www.signresearch.org/consumer)

“AS INCREASINGLY RARE WORKS OF VERNACULAR DESIGN THAT ARE SIGNIFICANT IN THEIR OWN RIGHT, MANY HISTORIC SIGNS...WARRANT ACTIVE INITIATIVES TO ENSURE THEIR SURVIVAL.”

—Thomas Rinaldi, *New York Neon*

“HISTORIC SIGNS HELP DEFINE A CITY. THEY CAN END UP BEING LANDMARKS AND BREAK UP THE ENDLESS LINES OF MATTRESS FIRMS AND DICK’S SPORTING GOODS STORES. THEY HELP PEOPLE REMEMBER A CITY.”

—Jude Cook, Cook & Company, who has brought back to life many of the historic signs in Tucson, AZ

PLACEMAKING

Historic and vintage signs can enhance creative placemaking, which is defined by a Planner Advisory Service (PAS) Memo as **“a new way of engaging creative people and activities to address social and economic issues in communities.”**

—Leonardo Vazquez,
Creative Placemaking

Historic or vintage signs can enhance a program by increasing vibrancy, economic opportunities, and with stakeholder participation, while allowing the community to take ownership. Combining a mural program with either existing historic signs or new or replica signs, can be very impactful on a downtown or community.

Creative placemaking often revolves around art and includes murals. But could a historic neon sign be considered art? Neon is the unique combination of science, creativity and craftsmanship that takes many years to master, just like many other artistic formats. Anyone who ever had a chance to visit the Neon Museum in Las Vegas (www.neonmuseum.org) would not hesitate to answer this question in the affirmative – yes, it is art.

CULTURAL HERITAGE

Historic and vintage signs represent much more than a creative piece of history. These signs are reflective of the neighborhood or community in which they are located.

“[Historic signs] often reflect the ethnic makeup of a neighborhood and its character, as well as the social and business activities carried out there. By giving concrete details about daily life in a former era, historic signs allow the past to speak to the present in ways that buildings by themselves do not.”

—Michael Auer,
The Preservation of Historic Signs

“Their enduring ability to stir strong feelings is a testament to the significance of neon signs as works of design and as objects of cultural heritage.”

—Thomas Rinaldi, *New York Neon*

Some of this appeal can be explained by the diverse places that neon signs represent:

“Other than the citizens themselves, there are few more immediate indicators of the multi-ethnicity of urban populations than the pop-up idiosyncratic signage of shops, cafés, and restaurants.”

—Darren Anderson, *How Advertising Conquered Urban Space*



Obviously, historic and vintage signs can be highly representative of varying cultures and promote diversity in communities.

The restoration of the old Route 66 sign for the El Pueblo Motor Lodge in Flagstaff, AZ was an extremely important effort, given that one of the first meetings to establish the Navajo Code Talkers in WWII took place in this location. Karl Eberhard, former Historic Preservation Officer for the city of Flagstaff led the effort to save and restore this classic sign, states that **“the sign at the El Pueblo Motor lodge is a treasured cultural resource and marker for the region that helps to save the character of the Route 66 corridor.”**

Image source: Dennis Wall,
www.dwallfiction.com/home-grown-fiction

ROLE OF SIGN MUSEUMS



Jude Cook, Ignite Sign Art Museum

Another important aspect that reflects the cultural significance of historic and vintage signs is the emergence of sign museums. These institutions often provide a home to classic signs that have outlived their useful purpose, and now provide the public with an opportunity to witness a wide collection of artistic commercial displays that entertain the eyes and stimulate the imagination.

MUSEUM OF NEON ART (MONA):

www.neonmona.org (Glendale, CA)

AMERICAN SIGN MUSEUM:

www.americansignmuseum.org (Cincinnati, OH)

TENDERLOIN MUSEUM:

www.tenderloinmuseum.org (San Francisco, CA)

NEON MUSEUM:

www.neonmuseum.org (Las Vegas, NV)

IGNITE SIGN ART MUSEUM:

www.ignitemuseum.com (Tucson, AZ)

NATIONAL NEON SIGN MUSEUM:

www.nationalneonsignmuseum.org (Dallas, OR)

NEON MUSEUM OF PHILADELPHIA:

www.neonmuseumofphiladelphia.com (Philadelphia, PA)

ECONOMIC IMPACT

TUCSON, AZ

The city of Tucson, Arizona has had an ordinance in place protecting historic signs for over 10 years. The Heritage Landmark Sign Code has resulted in the restoration of 25 signs in the community to their former glory. The city's sign code, combined with the efforts of the Tucson Historic Preservation Foundation and the Ignite Neon Sign Museum, provide economic benefits to the City of Tucson, enhancing the tourist experience and resulting in positive economic development for Tucson.

- The Tucson Historic Preservation Foundation has taken advantage of the city's historic sign preservation to:
 - host evening tours of some of the city's most iconic glowing historic landmark neon signs.
 - host evening tours of some of the city's most iconic glowing historic landmark neon signs.
 - develop an award winning self-guided driving tour of vintage signs, which is termed "The Neon Pueblo."
 - create the Vintage Tucson Neon Art Walk



Image source: preservationtucson.org



HOTEL CONGRESS WAS THE FIRST HISTORIC LEGACY SIGN DESIGNATED IN TUCSON.



The Ignite Sign Art Museum was founded in Tucson, Arizona by Jude Cook, who began his own sign business (Cook & Company) over 40 years ago. Cook has restored 23 historic signs in Tucson over the past 10 years. Several years ago, Cook decided to start sharing his collection of signs by opening one of the more recent sign museums in the country, the Ignite Sign Art Museum. This museum has become a destination for many that are interested in signs of old, and it also serves as a unique and attractive venue to host special events.

CASA GRANDE, AZ

The City of Casa Grande, Arizona represents an excellent public and private partnership that created the Neon Sign Park as the centerpiece of their downtown revitalization efforts.

“Casa Grande, Arizona’s new neon sign park is the centerpiece of the local preservation commission and Main Street organization’s downtown revitalization efforts, and in just over a year it has already become a prime attraction and catalyst for redevelopment and creativity in the small town.”

—Melissa Aude, *Let there be light:
New neon sign park now illuminates downtown*



The Casa Grande Neon Sign Park (www.neonsignpark.com) received a grant from the American Express Partners in Preservation program, a partnership of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and The American Express Foundation. Casa Grande Main Street took second place among 25 cities nationwide and was awarded \$144,000 in January 2018. Funding provided for the restoration of 14 vintage and neon signs, along with installation and landscaping in the Arizona Plaza site in Historic Downtown.

In addition, the city received assistance from Urban Land Institute of Arizona through a Technical Assistance Panel in which 20 high-level building industry professionals traveled to Casa Grande to discuss how the park can serve as a catalyst for redevelopment and creativity.

“When it comes to neon, it’s public art and science. As art, it remains vibrant today. Preserving our past (with historic signs) is a roadside attraction, hence tourism and economic development.”

—Marge Jantz, former Executive Director for Casa Grande Main Street

GILBERT, AZ

The Town of Gilbert, Arizona, represents a jurisdiction that has turned an economically depressed downtown into a vibrant downtown. How did they do it? By using the town's design guidelines to encourage neon signs. Although not historic signs these new neon signs certainly are vintage in appearance and have played a large role in bringing a defunct downtown back to life.

“Vintage signs not only create a sense of place, but can assist with creating an economically vibrant downtown.”

—Linda Edwards, former Planning Manager with the Town of Gilbert, AZ



“[Neon] keeps a city's spirits up in the wee small hours, its illumination making streets safer and making economic activity viable after the sun goes down.”

—Tom Downs, *San Francisco Neon*

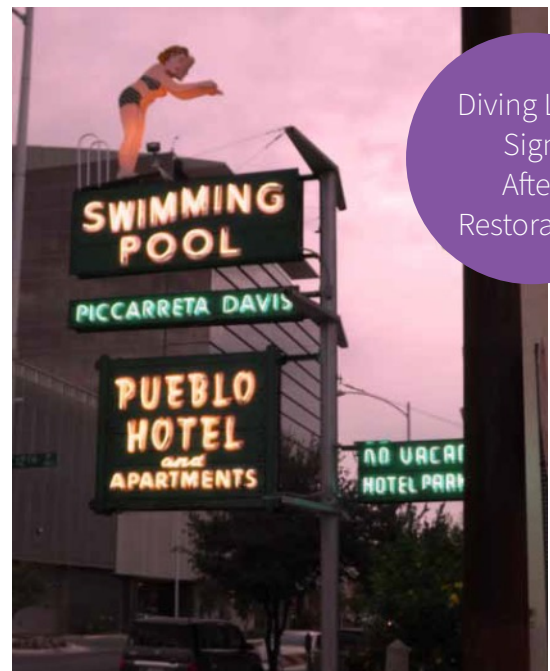
REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

Tucson, Arizona's ten-year-old historic landmark sign ordinance started with one man's effort to save the "diving lady" sign, which for more than 60 years had welcomed visitors to the Pueblo Hotel. Barry Davis, the new owner, converted the property into law offices in 1993 and then started a years-long effort to get the city to grant a permit to restore the dilapidated sign.

Diving Lady Sign Before Restoration



Diving Lady Sign After Restoration



It wasn't easy. The sign was non-conforming for several reasons: the sign was in the right-of-way, exceeded the 12-foot maximum height, did not meet the required setback, and on top of it pole signs were also not allowed. The owner could not restore the sign since once removed the new sign would need to comply with the existing code.

This scenario is not that uncommon in other jurisdictions, where the restoration of a historic or vintage sign is not allowed since it is non-conforming. Davis could not take down the sign without complying with the current code. Fortunately, some jurisdictions have realized the value of historic and vintage signs and are taking action to save them, such as Tucson and other jurisdictions.

“The primary focus of sign regulation over the past century has been on eliminating signs, not preserving them.”

— Stephen R. Miller, Historic Signs, Commercial Speech, and the Limits of Preservation

BEST PRACTICES

TUCSON, ARIZONA

The City of Tucson adopted their Heritage Landmark Sign code (HLS) in 2011. In a multiyear initiative, the Tucson-Pima County Historical Commission, the City of Tucson Historic Preservation Office, the Citizen Sign Code Committee, and the Sign Code Division banded together to draft the HLS code. The city has approved 25 HLS signs since 2011. The purpose of the HLS code is to “provide for the preservation of the City of Tucson’s unique character, history, and identity, as reflected in its historic and iconic signs, and to restore the sense of place that existed within the central business district and in areas of the City with concentrations of surviving historic signs.”

There are three types of HLS: classic, transitional, and replica and are defined as follows; a Classic HLS is a heritage landmark sign originally installed prior to 1961, a transitional HLS is a heritage landmark sign originally installed between 1961 and 1974 inclusive, and a replica HLS is an accurate reconstruction of an original sign that no longer exists. For a sign to qualify as a replica it must have been originally installed prior to 1961.

The preservation of Heritage Landmark Signs is implemented through use of an official Tucson Register of Heritage Landmark Signs. Approximately 200 signs have been included on the City’s Register. Inclusion on the Register is voluntary and handled through an ‘opt-in’ process.



To qualify under the HLS program a sign needs to meet the following technical guidelines:

- the sign shall include or have once included exposed integral incandescent lighting, or exposed neon lighting,
- the sign shall use materials and technology representative of its period of construction,
- the sign shall be non-rectangular or non-planar,
- the sign shall be a permanent sign, including but not limited to a detached, projecting, wall, or roof sign and the sign is structurally safe or can be made safe without substantially altering its historical appearance.

In addition to qualify under the HLS program the following cultural/historical/design guidelines are needed:

- the sign shall exemplify the cultural, economic, and historic heritage of Tucson;
- the sign shall exhibit extraordinary aesthetic quality, creativity, and innovation and the sign is unique;
 - or was originally associated with a chain or franchise business that is either a local or regional chain or franchise only found in Tucson or the southwestern United States;
 - or there is scholarly documentation to support its preservation;
 - or it is a rare surviving example of a once common type.

This last section is unique since it does allow for a sign to be relocated to Tucson from the County or Southwest if it has historical significance. Dan Bursuck, Principal Planner with the City of Tucson, indicated that “the city amended the code recently to allow relocation not only to another location with commercial or industrial zoning but also from the region to allow some additional flexibility in the HLS code.”

Property owners can exempt their registered Historic Landmark Signs from the total sign allowance allotted for their property. The HLS code also allows for the recreation of historical signs that existed on a site or in a district, or for new signs constructed using historic styles. Administratively, the Tucson-Pima County Historical Commission reviews the application and makes a recommendation to the Planning Director.

Carlos Loranzo with the Tucson County Historical Commission believes the HLS program has helped Tucson “develop a strong sense of place.”

SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH

In 2018, Salt Lake City (SLC) adopted a Vintage Sign Ordinance.

The purpose of the code is: “to promote the retention, restoration, reuse, and reinstatement of nonconforming signs that represent important elements of Salt Lake City's heritage and enhance the character of a corridor, neighborhood, or the community at large.”

Administration of this code is straightforward since the existing special exception process is utilized. This process allows for administrative approval by the Zoning Administrator.



Image Source: Cater Williams, KSL.com

Approvals for vintage signs are contingent on the application meeting these four standards: the sign was not placed as part of a Localized Alternative Signage Overlay District and has not been granted flexibility from the base zoning through a planned development agreement or by the Historic Landmark Commission; is not a billboard as defined [elsewhere in the ordinance]; retains its original design character, or that character will be reestablished or restored, based on historic evidence such as drawings or photographs. In addition, the application needs to meet at least four of the following six criteria: (1) The sign was specifically designed for a business, institution, or other establishment on the subject site; (2) The sign bears a unique emblem, logo, or another graphic specific to the City, or region; (3) The sign exhibits specific characteristics that enhance the streetscape or identity of a neighborhood; (4) The sign is or was characteristic of a specific historic period; (5) The sign is or was integral to the design or identity of the site or building where the sign is located; or, (6) The sign represents an example of craftsmanship in the application of lighting technique, use of materials, or design.

SLC allows a vintage sign to be relocated within the site or the contiguous zoning district. The code allows for some changes to the sign that are in the same style as the design of the original sign including: shape and form, size, typography, illustrative elements, and use of color. The SLC vintage code also allows for a sign to be recreated from an image (the code uses the term reinstatement). In addition, the code allows a vintage sign to be relocated to a new site for use as a piece of public art, provided that the original design and character of the sign is retained, or will be restored, and it advertises a business no longer in operation. Once designated, a vintage sign is exempt from the calculation of allowed signage on a site.

NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

Nashville adopted a Landmark Sign Ordinance in 2011. A Landmark sign is defined as, “a sign that exemplifies the cultural, architectural, or commercial identity of Nashville and Davidson County, is iconic in its location, and contributes to the surrounding neighborhood character.”

The Landmark Sign Ordinance has three categories of signs, historic, vintage and replica. A Historic sign must be 50 years old and meet the following five criteria: excellence in a particular period of construction:

- and/or is unique;
- retains the majority of its character-defining features;
- is structurally safe;
- is not a billboard;
- the sign is unique or was originally associated with a chain or franchise business that is either a local or regional chain or franchise only found in Nashville or the southeastern United States.

A vintage sign must be constructed between twenty-five and fifty years before the date of application. Applications are reviewed on the cultural and iconic contribution to the surroundings. A replica sign is permissible when based on sufficient historical documentation of the sign and its location. A replica sign must use historical materials and technologies or use contemporary materials and technologies that visually match historical ones.

The code allows for relocation of a sign designated under the landmark code to another location on the premises, to another location that houses the same or similar business, or to an area of similar character within a one-mile radius of the present location.

Signs designated under the landmark code are exempt 100% from the sign code for signs that do not advertise the business or are replica signs and 50% for signs that do advertise the business. The Landmark Sign Ordinance is administered through the Metropolitan Zoning Commission.



Image source: Debra Jane Selzter, roadsidearchitecture.com

MIAMI, FLORIDA

The City of Miami has an Historic section of their sign ordinance that allows for designated signs to be repaired, restored, structurally altered, reconstructed, or relocated. Miami allows for this special treatment because “historic signs may possess intrinsic importance or acquire that importance as a result of their association with the historic resource through which they have become associated.” The code is administered by the Historic & Environmental Preservation board (HEPB) through the Certificate of Appropriateness Process.

The HEPB reviews eight different criteria in determination if a sign is “historic.” It is important to note that the code does not specify that a sign needs to be of a certain age to qualify or that all of the criteria must be met for a sign to qualify as historic. The eight different criteria that the HEPB reviews are the following:

- associated with historic figures, events, or places;
- significant as evidence of the history of the product, business, or service advertised;
- significant as reflecting the history of the building or the development of the historic district or multiple property designation;
- significant as reflecting the history of the building such as gold leaf on glass, neon, or stainless-steel lettering;
- integral to the building's design or physical fabric;
- outstanding examples of the sign maker's art;
- recognized as a local landmark because of its prominence and popular recognition as a focal point in the community and assists in defining the character of a district and assists in defining the character of a district.

The unique characteristic of Miami's criteria to qualify as an “historic” sign is the ability to have a sign recognized by the neighborhood as a focal point with no stated limitations on the age of a sign, such as 25 and 50 years, as is common in other codes.

PORTSMOUTH, NEW HAMPSHIRE

Another issue involving vintage signs (“vintage” in appearance) that communities often deal with is regulating signs in historic districts. A model in ensuring that new signs in historic districts are appropriate is Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where the Historic District Commission (HDC) has developed policy document for new signs and awnings.

The Guidelines were developed in conjunction with the City of Portsmouth's HDC and the Planning Department. When reviewing applications, the HDC considers a property's classification, recommending the greatest historic authenticity at focal buildings, with more flexibility at contributing structures, and the most at non-contributing properties. The Guidelines include many helpful images and provides clear guidance for applicants.

CONCLUSION

There are many reasons why there has been an increased focus on historic and vintage signs in recent years, including enhancing a community's creative placemaking, preserving a community's cultural heritage, and promoting the economic impact in a community. This growing awareness has manifested itself in historic and vintage codes, museums, and sign parks or museums. Some significant characteristics of the codes identified in this paper bear noting:

- It is common to exempt the historic or vintage sign from the code so as to provide an incentive to restore the sign;
- Allow flexibility in the time frame that qualifies for a vintage or historic sign, such as 25 years old for a vintage sign and 50 years for an historic sign. (Miami allows for increased flexibility by not stating limitations on the age);
- Flexibility in the allowed sign location is common, such as within a certain distance or in the same or similar zoning district;
- The recreation of a historic or vintage sign from an image that has been lost.

Other considerations to ensure that historic or vintage signs are saved:

- Exempt historic and vintage signs from permit fees, since the costs involved are often greater than a typical sign;
- Streamline the approval process;
- Include all the stakeholders in the process when creating a historic or vintage code to ensure community ownership and buy in.

IS NEON GREEN?

“ADAPTING NEON TO LEDS TURNS AN ARTFUL TREASURE THAT CAN LAST MORE THAN 50 YEARS, MADE FROM SUSTAINABLE AND RECYCLABLE MATERIALS BY SKILLED HANDS, INTO A THING THAT IS UNRECYCLABLE AND MADE CHIEFLY FROM UNSUSTAINABLE PETROLEUM PRODUCTS, A THING THAT MAY NOT LAST EVEN A DECADE.”

—Al Barna and Randall Ann Homan, *Saving Neon: A Best Practice Guide*

“LIGHT-EMITTING DIODES (LEDS) ARE SUGGESTED AS ENERGY-EFFICIENT ALTERNATIVES TO NEON TUBES, BUT THE COMPARISONS, WHICH OFTEN CLAIM A 90 PERCENT ENERGY SAVINGS FOR LED, OFTEN FAIL TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE RELATIVE INEFFICIENCY OF LED LIGHT SOURCES AS COMPARED TO NEON. WHILE AN LED LIGHT SOURCE OF A SIMILAR COLOR AND SIZE TO NEON MAY CONSUME LESS POWER, A FOOT OF LED TUBE LIGHTING LEFT ON FOR 12 HOURS PER DAY MAY CONSUME AS LITTLE AS 3.5 KWH PER YEAR; LED TYPICALLY OUTPUTS MUCH LESS LIGHT THAN THE NEON TUBE. ADJUSTING THE BRIGHTNESS OF THE LED FOR COMPARISON TO NEON, THE DIFFERENCE IN POWER CONSUMPTION IS LESS PRONOUNCED.”

—Evan Gillespie, *How Much Electricity Does a Neon Light Use?*

**WHEN
CONSIDERING
THE OVERALL
PICTURE,
YES, NEON IS
GREEN.**

REFERENCES

- Anderson, Darren, *How Advertising Conquered Urban Space*, Bloomberg City Lab, Nov. 14, 2019.
- Auer, Michael J., *The Preservation of Historic Signs*, National Park Service Preservation Brief 25, Oct. 1991.
- Aude, Melissa, *Let there be light: New neon sign park now illuminates downtown*, Casa Grande Dispatch, Updated Feb, 7, 2021.
- Downs, Tom, forward to Al Barn and Randall Ann Homan, *San Francisco Neon*, Giant Orange Press, San Francisco, 2015.
- Gillespie, Evan, <https://www.hunker.com/13412731/how-much-electricity-does-a-neon-light-use>.
- Homan, Randall & Al, *Saving Neon: A Best Practices Guide*, San Francisco: Giant Orange Press, 2018.
- Kellaris, James J., "100,000 Shoppers Can't Be Wrong: Signage Communication Evidence from the BrandSpark / Better Homes and Gardens American Shopper Study," presentation to the National Signage Research & Education Conference, University of Cincinnati, October 10-11, 2012, <https://signresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/BrandSpark-Better-Homes-and-Gardens-American-Shopper-Study2011.pdf>.
- Miami City, Miami Code, https://library.municode.com/fl/miami/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=PTIITHCO_CH23HIPR_ARTIHIPR_S23-6.4SI.
- Miller, Stephen R., Historic Signs, Commercial Speech, and the Limits of Preservation, 264 JOURNAL OF LAND USE [Vol. 25:2] Spring 2010.
- Nashville TN Landmark Sign Ordinance, http://nashville-tn.elaws.us/code/coor_title17_ch17.32_sec17.32.145.
- Portsmouth NH Guidelines for Awnings, http://files.cityofportsmouth.com/files/planning/drt/11-PNH_SignsAwnings_2016-03a.pdf.
- Preserve Tucson Neon Pueblo Sign Guide, https://preservetucson.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/the_neon_pueblo_tucsonsignguide.pdf.
- Rinaldi, Thomas E., *New York Neon* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013), 176.
- Salt Lake City, Vintage Sign Ordinance, https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/saltlakecityut/latest/saltlakecity_ut/0-0-0-69929#JD_21A.46.125.
- Tucson City Code, https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/tucson/latest/tucson_az_udc/0-0-0-27095.
- Vazquez, Leonardo, Creative Placemaking, APA, PAS Memo Nov./Dec. 2016., <https://www.planning.org/knowledgebase/creativeplacemaking/>.

PUBLISHED BY:



WWW.SIGNRESEARCH.ORG

This report remains the property of the Sign Research Foundation.
None of the information contained within can be used,
republished or reprinted without express permission from the Sign Research Foundation.