CHICAGO'S "SKYLINE OF SIGNS"

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Abstract

In the November 1933 issue of *Signs of the Times*—the leading trade publication of the outdoor advertising industry—Walter D. Krupke, a general sales manager for the Chicago-based Federal Electric Company, heralded "Chicago's Million-Dollar Skyline of Signs."[1] The skyline to which Krupke referred to was the particular stretch visible from the recently opened Outer Drive (now Lake Shore Drive) that connected the South Side through the city, passing the exposition site for "A Century of Progress," and up to the North Side. This stretch was anchored by the dramatic frontage of tall buildings, forming a street wall on Michigan Avenue and facing the open expanse of Grant Park. While these new skyscrapers seemed to define the image of Chicago through a rising skyline, for Krupke, the architecture was secondary, mere support for giant electric advertising displays, also known as illuminated spectaculars. These outdoor advertising structures—and the potential of their visibility—played as vital a role in representing civic progress and urban advancement as any building in this same aerial territory. They signaled not only the city's commercial vitality as a growing consumer market and burgeoning metropolis, but also a cultural vitality, prompting a writer in 1930 to discern the parallel, "The improvement and expansion of the Outdoor Advertising medium, in Chicago, is commensurate with the progress of the city."[2] In effect, architecture became a backdrop, overtaken by outdoor advertising structures that marked Chicago's modernity through a "skyline of signs."

Krupke estimated that this particular stretch of the skyline had a value of more than $1,000,000 in terms of costs for current displays and potential construction along this thoroughfare and on top of the buildings. Notably, he placed the area's "veritable constellation of electrical displays" in the same league as New York's "Great White Way" of dazzling signage in and around Broadway in Times Square. This comparison demonstrated Chicago's metropolitan rise, in a manner not unlike many other cities across the country that heralded their own "Great White Way."[3] A photo spread of three large spectaculars accompanied the article showcasing some of the current electrical advertising displays in the city. It featured recent installations in Chicago by the Federal Electric Company for different cleaning products. The locations were not identified, or identifiable from the photographs, but all were mounted on top of buildings, rather than attached to the side or freestanding. They were also sizable, ranging from 79-feet long by 125-feet high, 36-by-50 feet, and 52-by-25 feet. Supported by a structural steel frame, the sign letters and symbols were porcelain enamel, with both neon and incandescent lighting, which flashed on and off.[4]

Krupke's intentions, naturally, were to valorize spectaculars, his company's product. As an outdoor advertising medium, he stressed the "quality of performance" through repeated and regular viewings. This attribute of duration was also an important aspect of spectaculars, since "each repeated view of the huge display enhances the thought of dependability." Their "sheer size and impressiveness" demonstrated the company's resources, stability, and faith in their product

being advertised, which, he noted also benefited local businesses by advertising products sold in local stores. Despite their large size and striking visual effects, Krupke interestingly noted how spectaculars were removed from the general public's conception of them: "The immense size of these spectaculars passes unnoticed because they are rarely seen except from a distance of 200 feet or more."[5] Because these spectaculars were placed atop buildings, people could not see them up close, and therefore could not comprehend their structural mass in relation to their own body. Because they were placed at a remove, and seen from a distance, spectaculars posed a unique relational problem for the public.

The legacy of Daniel Burnham and Edward H. Bennett's 1909 "Plan of Chicago," which set out to organize the physical infrastructure and improve the architectural quality of the city amidst dramatic urban growth and development, provided for an especially accommodating framework for outdoor advertising structures to appear. An article in the April 1930 issue of *Advertising Outdoors* described the appealing qualities of the city for the industry: "Fast moving, fast growing Chicago will always be a model Outdoor Advertising city, because of its broad extent, its systematic layout, and ample provision for every conceivable outdoor interest."[6] In addition to Chicago's position as a national railroad hub, it noted the extensive, orderly network of wide boulevards, street grid, and highways for automobiles, buses, and streetcars that provided ample, well-suited locations for outdoor advertising. The physical plan of the city itself seemed ideally configured to install displays of varying types: "Nowhere is there a city so adaptable for an exposition of the medium of Outdoor Advertising."[7]

A photograph illustrating the article pointed out how the shape, plan, and activity—the adaptability—of the city made it ideal for outdoor advertising. Amidst the bustle of automobile traffic, a street-level view of Michigan Avenue looks north to show how a colossal outdoor advertising installation at Randolph Street stood out in and as part of the downtown "Loop" business district. The freestanding structure at the northeast corner of the intersection consisted of a spectacular—a monumental, illuminated display—for Chevrolet automobiles mounted above a large billboard for Maxwell House coffee.[8] The composite outdoor advertising structure, installed by the Federal Electric Company of Chicago, emblazoned with company names, logos, and slogans towers over the wide boulevard, ideally positioned to face the motorists in their vehicles, pedestrians on the sidewalk, and train passengers on the Illinois Central Railroad tracks that ran parallel to Lake Michigan. It joined the surrounding urban fabric with the Chicago Public Library completed in 1891 catercorner across the street; the Edward H. Bennett-designed peristyle completed in 1917 on the southeast corner of the intersection, marking the northwest corner of Grant Park; and a range of skyscrapers completed in the previous decade, most prominently the Wrigley Building, completed in 1924, standing in the distance at the vanishing point of Michigan Avenue in the photograph. This combination of planned infrastructure, civic structures, commercial skyscrapers, and public parks, along with major sporting events and conventions elsewhere in the city, signaled Chicago's burgeoning modernity, placing it in an admirable position in relation to its peers, both national and international. "The new Chicago is a city so gloriously modern, that it is held up as a model to inspire emulation in staid old Eastern and European cities."[9]

The potential of the Chicago skyline for outdoor advertising was best captured in a panoramic view of that city that complemented the photograph of the Chevrolet and Maxwell House display structure in the *Advertising Outdoors* article. The image, a Kaufmann & Fabry print of a 1927 painting by William Starbuck Macy, shows an expansive vista of the city, stretching from the 29-story Stevens Hotel (1927) and Buckingham Fountain (1927) at the southern edge on the left end of the composition up to the 30-story Wrigley Building (1924) and 36-story Tribune Tower (1925) that mark the northern edge of the view on the right end of the composition. The broad expanse of Grant Park and railroad tracks along the lakefront protected this area from visual obstruction, allowing this view of the Chicago skyline to become the defining image of the city, and also a perfect canvas for outdoor advertising to proliferate for easy, prominent viewing by a large number of people. While for many this urban vista showing the dramatic rise of skyscrapers indicated the culmination of Chicago's status as a modern city, for the outdoor advertising industry, its consummation only arrived with the installation of electric advertising displays and illuminated spectaculars atop it all.

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Notes

1. Krupke, "Chicago's Million-Dollar Skyline of Signs," 19, 53.

2. Stokes, "Chicago–A Rich Market for the Outdoor Advertiser," 6.

3. See John A. Jakle, "The Great White Way and Electric Sign Art," 195–224.

4. "Cleansers," *Signs of the Times*, 18.

5. Krupke, "Chicago's Million-Dollar Skyline of Signs," 19, 53.

6. Stokes, "Chicago–A Rich Market for the Outdoor Advertiser," 4.

7. Stokes, "Chicago–A Rich Market for the Outdoor Advertiser," 6.

8. By December 1933, the billboard, owned by General Outdoor Advertising, had been replaced by an advertisement for Sunkist oranges, "Outdoor Advertising—Where the People Are," *Signs of the Times*, 11. And by December 1934, the Sunkist billboard had been replaced by a spectacular by General Outdoor Advertising Company measuring 35-by-72 feet with 3,000 lamps and 1,079 feet of neon tubing with animated effects of an orange and trademark name, "Enlarged Sunkist Spectacular," *Signs of the Times*, 82; and "Chicago, Ill.," *Signs of the Times*, 73.

9. Stokes, "Chicago–A Rich Market for the Outdoor Advertiser," 4.