

S I G N S O N H I G H

CONTINENTAL PROJECTS A MESSAGE DOWNTOWN

Bottom: Fifty-two stories high, the Continental Airlines logo shines over Houston. Below: At ground level the signage contains words, and is more modest in size.



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Courtesy Continental Airlines

If CONTINENTAL AIRLINES hoped to garner some attention by beaming its corporate logo onto the roof of its downtown Houston office tower, then the company got its wish. But wishes can be tricky things, and in the case of Continental, the attention it got is not necessarily the attention it desired.

The attention Continental wanted was simply one that affirmed its corporate identity and its place in a booming central city. The attention it received, at least from some, had more to do with its breaking ranks with Houston's leading corporate citizens. For close to three decades, beginning when the Shell Oil Company moved its headquarters to Houston and chose not to decorate its headquarters at One Shell Plaza with signage, Houston companies have honored a gentleman's agreement to keep the Houston skyline pristine. In 1993, that agreement was codified into a city ordinance that banned any signs higher than 42.5 feet above the ground in the Central Business District.

And the Continental logo is definitely higher than that. Beamed onto the east and west faces of the polygonal cap that tops its 52-story tower at 1600 Smith Street, the Continental images are more than 700 feet above the sidewalk. A laser shooting upward through a glass lens creates the 1,500-square-foot logos, which are visible against a background of blue lighting.

Still, the images, being laser projections, are impermanent. Too, they're visible only at night, and lack any words or lettering. Partly because of that, says Continental vice-president Nene Foxhall, the company didn't see their beamed logos as incompatible with what was already being done downtown. "There were already lights on buildings," she notes, "some of it pretty prominent." That was, however, a minority opinion. "When we talked with the city planning department, they informed us that what we wanted wasn't allowed by the signage code," says Foxhall. "Even though

the laser technology wasn't covered technically by the ordinance, in their reading it was covered by the spirit of the ordinance."

As a result, if Continental hoped to brand its corporate headquarters — an issue important to the company's senior management — it would have to get the ordinance amended. Following discussions with the mayor's office, the city attorney, and John Castillo, the city council member whose district includes the Continental building, in early 2000 it began trying to do just that by garnering support from others downtown. Not surprisingly, some were vocal in their opposition to the idea. One of the leading voices against Continental's plan was Louis Sklar, executive vice president of Hines Interests. It was Gerald Hines who, in the early 1970s, had helped persuade Shell Oil to forego a sign on its building and, with other developers such as Kenneth Schnitzer, promoted the idea that downtown's architecture should be allowed to speak for itself, and not be marred by names or logos.

Talking to a reporter from the *Houston Chronicle*, Sklar noted that "one of the things we have is the absence of buildings becoming billboards. I would hate to see something that is a collective landmark spoiled by one more sign." The concern is one echoed by Anita Brown, executive director of Scenic Houston, who notes that "the fact that the downtown skyline is free of commercial advertising is a very unique feature of Houston. There's not another city in the United States that has a skyline like that. It's something we can be proud of, and something we should be careful to protect."

But if the objecting voices were expected, the surprise was that there were voices of support as well, among them Jordy Tollett of the Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau. Houston, Tollett said, was changing, and what might have been good in the 1970s and 1980s, when

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downtown was primarily office space, was not so good for today, when the city center is moving toward a pattern of mixed use. Signs, according to Tollett, could be helpful in making the area look alive and vital. And like it or not, there were going to be more of them. Already, the letters broadcasting the name of Enron Field had exceeded the height restriction, a violation allowed because the sign ordinance exempts government buildings. And the lighted guitar that advertises the Hard Rock Cafe in Bayou Place also broke the 42.5 foot barrier, allowed because it was designated a piece of art rather than a piece of signage.

That what was once a consensus opinion against signs was no longer as firm as it used to be was made clear when Central Houston Inc. and the Greater Houston Partnership were asked to weigh in on the question of Continental's projected logo. In the past, there likely would have been no debate on the issue, notes one longtime observer of the groups, simply a rejection of the very idea of a sign. But on this occasion the organizations' memberships were split, resulting in resolutions that on one hand opposed chang-

ing the city's sign ordinance, but on the other supported an exception for Continental.

And an exception is exactly what Continental received — a revision of the sign ordinance worded in such a way that it applied only to Continental Airlines and its downtown tower. Or so proponents claimed. Scenic Houston's Anita Brown is less sure. "The city claims this change to the ordinance is extremely tightly crafted, and that no other commercial entity will be able to come in and project their logo onto a building," she says. "But I'm afraid they're just opening the door to more commercial advertising."

And Continental? With the city's approval in hand, it began preparing and testing its laser projector. "We're sensitive to the criticism we've heard," Nene Foxhall says. "We admire Houston's skyline, and wouldn't want to harm it. But we just respectfully disagree that our projection will do that, or open the door to problems down the road." In October, the logo appeared as part of a short-lived test. Regular projection began on December 14, one more sign, if you will, of a changing downtown. — Mitchell J. Shields

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A LOSS ON THE PARKWAY



THE GULF PUBLISHING COMPANY, one of the more distinctive buildings flanking Allen Parkway, could soon be gone. The 72-year-old structure, designed in 1928 by Hedrick & Gottlieb and added to in 1936 and 1939 by Alfred C. Finn, has been sold to a developer who plans to replace it with a high-rise residential tower.

The stucco-faced printing plant at 3301 Allen Parkway was constructed in a Spanish Mediterranean style. The first of a group of printing businesses to settle in the area — the Rein Company Building at 3401 Allen Parkway followed later in 1928, and the Star

Engraving Company at 3201 Allen Parkway was added in 1930 — Gulf Publishing was designed to blend in with the pleasure drive ambiance of what was then Buffalo Bayou Parkway. Despite its age, the building has no official designation as a historic structure, and so is not under even the small protection of Houston's preservation ordinance. According to the seller, the building was in poor condition and not suitable for restoration. Given the escalating property values nearby, the building's 2.6-acre site was seen as more valuable for housing than for history. — MJS Shields