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# Design Guide for Signs

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## Introduction

Signs are essential to the city’s commercial character and activity. They communicate information, add vitality and provide a sense of direction. But while they can enhance the cityscape, they can also diminish it. If they are poorly designed or inappropriately located, signs can detract from the surrounding architecture, overwhelm public spaces and undermine streetscape quality. Similarly, too many signs can create visual clutter that reduces their effectiveness.

The design principles presented in this Design Guide encourage appropriate signage that makes a positive contribution to the city.



*Signs are accepted as an essential part of the commercial character and activity in the city*

## Intention of the Design Guide

This Design Guide should be read alongside the District Plan’s provisions for signs. The Guide provides:

- objectives and guidelines to assist the design and assessment of signage proposals
- help for design/signage professionals and the public in interpreting terms used in the District Plan provisions – especially those relating to ‘permitted activities’ (those that can be undertaken as of right and do not require a resource consent), and the assessment criteria used to consider resource consent applications

The guidelines do not stipulate signs of a particular type, size or appearance. Instead, they promote general design principles that can be applied in different ways appropriate to each proposal and site. The illustrations further clarify and explain these principles, but are not intended to represent actual design solutions.

The Design Guide is in three main parts. The first identifies the key characteristics of well-designed signage in terms of scale and location, relationship to context, implications for road safety and other issues. The second part contains the design guidelines: these are applicable to all signage in Wellington City. The third part provides additional guidelines that apply to specific types of signs, including those relating to heritage items (such as buildings, areas or trees). However, heritage-related signs are not covered in detail: readers should also refer to the District Plan heritage provisions (Chapters 20 and 21) and any specific guidelines for heritage buildings/areas.



*Well designed and suitably located signs can contribute to the commercial vitality of businesses in the city and provide a sense of direction*

# Key Issues

## Types of Advertising/Signage

There are three main types of advertising signs:

- **identification signs**, which identify and name sites, buildings, building uses and building tenants. Identification signs help promote the city’s institutions, businesses and buildings, and enable people to find their way around the city.
- **site-related advertising signs**, which promote goods and services available on the premises.
- **‘third party advertising’ signs**, which are not generally related to their specific location. Such signs are often part of nationwide campaigns promoting national or international goods and services.

Signs take two basic forms – those that are attached or otherwise related to a building/structure, and those that are free-standing. Signs related to buildings/structures may be painted, projected or applied to a building’s exterior; attached to the building (against its face or at right angles); or designed as three-dimensional objects or site banners. Signs may also take the form of a visual image projected onto a building wall.



Example of three-dimensional signage

## Characteristics of Appropriate Signs

The visual quality of a sign is dependent on its scale and location (relative to the host building/site); its relationship to the surrounding area; the nature of that area; and the number of other signs seen in close proximity. The detailed design of the sign (materials, graphics, colour, lighting, animation and supporting structure) and how well it is maintained are also important. All these factors need to be considered collectively when designing or assessing a sign, whether permanent or temporary.

### What is Appropriate Signage?

Appropriate signs:

- appear to be an integrated part of the building or site they are attached or located on
- are compatible with the scale, design and visual character of the building or site
- fit in with and complement the character of their surroundings
- are not visually obtrusive
- do not result in visual clutter
- respect traffic and pedestrian safety
- are of high design quality and well maintained
- respect the amenity of any nearby Residential Areas, special character areas or public spaces and do not compromise heritage values.

### Scale and Location of signs

Well-designed signs are ‘in scale’ and compatible with the building or site on which they are located. Signs that are ‘in scale’ with the host building have dimensions that relate to the dimensions of the building and its primary façade elements (e.g. windows, structural bays, parapets, floor-to-floor height,



Example of signs painted on the building exterior



Example of projecting signs attached at right angles to the building façade

verandahs, etc). They respect the proportions and composition of the building, and do not obscure or dominate any architectural features. Overall, a well-designed sign maintains the design coherence of the building to which it is attached, and is well integrated with its façade.

Free-standing signs should relate to the layout, scale and character of the open space or site in which they are located. They should not compromise existing planting and landscape features.

### Relationship to Surrounding Context

Appropriate signs fit in well with their context, and complement the character of the surrounding area. They do this largely by respecting the type and scale of adjacent buildings and activities, and the character of the locality.

Different settings have different character. Wellington’s Central Area is diverse and comprises several identifiable areas, each with its own distinctive character and/or heritage value. In all cases, signage needs to be sensitive to the location, significance and special meaning of each area. A sign that is appropriate to the character of a large-scale area dominated by vehicles might significantly detract from the character of a low-scale pedestrian precinct.

Particular care needs to be exercised with billboards. The advertising industry typically uses a standard size of 6m x 3m for billboard signs. Because of their standard size and fixed dimensions, such signs are not always well-integrated with the character of existing buildings, sites and streetscapes. The location of this type of signage requires careful assessment.

### Visual Obtrusiveness

Because signs aim to attract attention, they are often placed in visually prominent locations where they can be readily seen by many people and from many different locations. This means they may become visually dominating, distracting, unpleasant to view and visually obtrusive.

‘Visual obtrusiveness’ is directly linked to the scale, location and prominence of the sign, and the method and intensity of any illumination. For instance, highly visible signs that are oversized, brightly illuminated and/or moving can easily become visually obtrusive. The character of the surrounding environment also influences visual obtrusiveness. For example, any given sign may seem either appropriate or obtrusive, depending on the scale of the surrounding space and the distance from which it is viewed.

Obtrusiveness of signs is a particular issue when signs are located in or near to Residential Areas, public spaces, or areas of special character or heritage value.

### Visual Clutter

A proliferation of signs within a confined area can create an untidy appearance, or ‘visual clutter’. This both reduces the effectiveness of the signage, and undermines the area’s aesthetic qualities.



*Architectural features (defined in section 4) help to ‘sub-divide’/articulate the building façade and provide visual interest and a sense of relief. The size, proportions and arrangement of these elements determine the architectural composition of the building façade. The intensity and imagery of the façade elements/features determine the architectural style of the building and its detailed design quality.*



*Numerous signs of contrasting size, style, type, colour and graphics, viewed in close proximity, add to the collective effect of clutter*

Visual clutter is especially likely to occur where there is an abundance of closely spaced or overlapping signs made to different designs, at competing scales and located haphazardly. Street elements such as streetlights, wires, trees or building features can also add to the cluttered effect.

To avoid visual clutter, new signs should take account of existing signs and surrounding streetscape features. Wherever possible, a co-ordinated approach should be taken to the design and location of multiple signage.

### Signs and Road Safety

Signs can affect traffic and pedestrian safety by distracting motorists, creating confusion and interrupting sightlines. The location, shape, scale, graphics, colour and any illumination/animation of signs should be carefully assessed from a road safety perspective. This is particularly important where signs are located around intersections, where they are visible from roads with high speed limits and traffic volumes, or where there are already many small signs.

### Design Quality

The design quality of a sign derives from its use of materials, colour, graphic design and lighting, and also from the design of the supporting structure and fixing detail. Designers need to consider the type, location and context of the sign in an integrated manner.

### Maintenance

Maintenance and repairs are integral to the overall quality of a sign and its visual impact. Maintenance requirements therefore need to be considered carefully during the design process. This applies to temporary signs which, if poorly designed or removed without due care, can adversely affect the fabric and appearance of the host building/site in an enduring way. High quality materials and a maintenance strategy can help minimise decay, deterioration and maintenance costs.

## Specific Signage Issues

### Signs and Heritage

Heritage items (buildings, objects, trees and areas) have special significance to the city. Signs relating to them should be designed and located carefully to avoid detracting from the special qualities of the heritage item, especially listed buildings or areas. Depending on the heritage significance of the item and its setting, this may mean only limited signage is allowed, if any.

### Illuminated/Animated Signs

Illuminated and animated signs (e.g. mechanical moving signs; 'moving' LED signs, video/television screens, projected laser advertising, kinetic signs, flashing signs) can add to urban vitality and interest, especially in areas where night-time entertainment activities are prominent. Such signs can also contribute to safety.

However, illuminated and animated signs have the potential to dominate their surroundings and cause significant adverse effects. Animated signs may distract motorists, while illuminated



*Good example of identification signage of high design quality that respects the character and context of the 'host' building*



*The sale and location of signs on heritage buildings should be sensitively approached. Signs projecting above the parapet line, as this one, have a significant impact on the heritage value of the building, altering its silhouette line and compromising its overall quality*

signs can cause glare at night. Both illuminated and animated signs are of particular concern where they are located in, or can be seen from residential or special character/heritage areas. If not appropriately designed, these signs can detract from the architecture of buildings and be a source of annoyance in Residential Areas.

Like all signs, illuminated and/or animated signs should be designed to respect the character and amenity of the context, and should be compatible with road safety.

## GENERAL GUIDELINES

### 1 Scale and Location of Signs

#### Objective

**OL.1** To ensure that new signs are well integrated with the building or site to which they are attached, and are compatible with the scale, design and visual character of that building or site.

#### Guidelines

**GL.1** New signs should be designed to be in scale with the building/site to which they are attached. To achieve this, the dimensions of new signs should relate to:

- important dimensions of the building and its façade elements such as height/width of the building façade, windows (size/proportions), structural bays, spacing between columns/pilasters, floor-to-floor height, parapets, etc
- the dimensions of the site and; the size, arrangement and design of any landscape or other features.

**GL.2** New signs should integrate well with the building/site they are located on. Signs should not obscure or visually dominate any architectural or other features of the host building or site.

Where signs are attached to buildings, it is usually effective to restrict them to the 'grid locations' set by the lines of primary façade elements such as verandahs, windows, cornice lines etc (see Diagrams 1 & 2). This is to ensure that the important elements that give the building its architectural character and style remain dominant features of the building façade.

**GL.3** New signs should not compromise or alter the overall form of the host building and its silhouette line. To achieve this signs should not:

- extend outside the building envelope, and/or
- project above the line of the parapet or the building roof top.

**GL.4** In most cases, signs on blank side elevations integrate better with the building if they are:

- set back from the edges of the side elevation, and
- aligned with or positioned with reference to important



#### What is an architectural feature?

An architectural feature is any feature on a building's façade/exterior, either integral or applied, which helps to 'sub-divide' the facade and provides visual interest and a sense of relief and façade detail.

Architectural features include windows, bays, balconies, columns, pilasters, cornices, parapets and corners, pediments, verandahs, string courses, balustrades, arches, any projections or recesses (linear, vertical or horizontal), corbels, gargoyles, ~~down pipes, rainwater heads, decorative detail, exposed structure, and other existing identification signage.~~

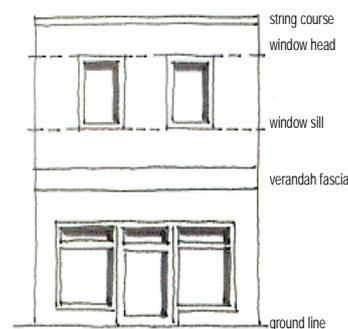


Diagram 1: Façade 'grid analysis' which uses the grids formed by architectural features to outline horizontal and vertical panels and indicate possible location for signage

lines on the main building façade (e.g. cornice and parapet lines, and/or lines created by the rhythm of windows or the spacing between columns, etc).

## 2 Relationship to Surrounding Context

### Objective

**O2.1** To ensure that new signs fit with the character of the surrounding area and acknowledge the wider city context.

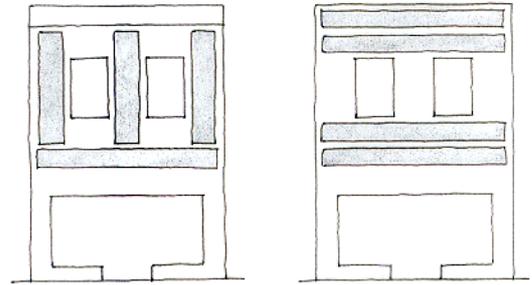
### Guidelines

**G2.1** New signs should relate to the character of the surrounding area by taking account of nearby buildings, streetscape/landscape features and existing signs. For example, larger signs are generally more suitable for vehicle-oriented areas; illuminated signs are generally appropriate to entertainment areas; human-scale signage enhances ‘pedestrian experience’ and is most desirable in pedestrian-oriented spaces.

**G2.2** The scale, location and design of signs should acknowledge where they will be viewed from. Generally, signs intended to be viewed from close range should be smaller and contain more detail than those to be viewed from further away.

**G2.3** Signs should not disrupt or visually dominate important characteristics of the surroundings (e.g. identified viewshafts, prominent skyline views, landmark buildings or those at the end of vistas). Standard billboards and projecting signs generally have a greater potential to detract from the character of their setting unless carefully positioned and designed.

**G2.4** Free-standing signs should be well integrated with their context, and should not compromise the quality and character of existing planting, landscaping or other design features. The location of free-standing signs, and especially those in pedestrian-oriented areas, should not compromise the ease of pedestrian movement.



*Diagram 2: Based on a ‘grid analysis’ this diagram indicates where a possible sign panel may be located*



*Signs should not obscure architectural features and should not project above the building roof top*

## 3 Visual Obtrusiveness

### Objective

**O3** To protect the significant characteristics of buildings, streetscapes, vistas and the city skyline from obtrusive signage.

### Guidelines

**G3.1** The visual impact of new signs should be examined from the full range of distances the sign will be viewed from. This is particularly important for large billboard and/or illuminated signs located in heritage and character areas, near Residential Areas and public spaces, or on upper building elevations and prominent city sites.

**G3.2** Billboard signs (free-standing or attached to buildings) that

draw the eye from **important vistas an identified view-shaft** or detract from the character of buildings are to be avoided.

**G3.3** Signs projecting out from the face of a building can adversely affect the streetscape by obstructing and cluttering views along the street. Small signs that sit close to the building can help to minimise this effect.

**G3.4** Corporate colour schemes and corporate signs/logos should be designed to fit in with and not dominate the host building or its setting (as they can, for example, if used to turn the whole building into a sign).

**G3.5** Skyline signs that are located either on the roof of a building and/or attached to lift machine rooms should be designed to avoid dominating the skyline. Nor should they emphasise the utilitarian character of lift structures. However, because of their visual prominence, identification signs on the upper parts of buildings can help people to find their way around the city. Such signs should therefore contribute positively to the legibility and collective image of the city.

**G3.6** Signs that are composed of individual letters affixed/applied to a building tend to be less dominating than those placed on a backing panel or material.



## 4 Visual Clutter

### Objective

**O4** To manage the number, design and location of new signs in a way that supports the aesthetic coherence of buildings and streetscapes, and avoid visual clutter.

### Guidelines

**G4.1** To avoid visual clutter:

- consider signage at the outset when designing new developments
- minimise the total number of individual signs on a single building or site
- minimise the number of different designs, shapes and sizes of signs on a single building or site. For example, individual signs on the same verandah fascia should be of a consistent width and compatible design
- consider the scale, location and positioning of new signs relative to existing signs and other features on the host building/site and the adjoining streetscape
- seek to integrate signage for buildings with more than one occupancy (for example, with collective signs at building/site entrances, or by adopting a uniform design/style for individual signs).
- signs should not be hung from, placed on or supported by other signs

*Larger signs are generally more appropriate in locations that will be viewed from further away. From the two examples, the top one works better as the sign is attached to, and set back within an expansive blank wall rather than crowding adjoining windows*

## 5 Signs and Road Safety

### Objective

**O5** To ensure that new signs do not have a detrimental effect on traffic or pedestrian safety.

### Guidelines

**G5.1** New signs should be designed so they do not distract drivers, or create confusion or road hazards for drivers or pedestrians. **This is particularly relevant in situations where traffic is travelling at speeds in excess of 50 kph.**

To achieve this:

- use appropriate colours and shapes, and locate signs where they do not conflict with traffic control devices (including traffic signals and signs)
- position signs so that they are either directed away from the road or can be easily read by passing motorists
- use concise and clear messages with simple graphics
- ensure that glare from illuminated signs (whether internally or externally lit) does not impair drivers' vision
- ensure that signs featuring any movement do not distract motorists

*Note, to minimise road hazards, new signs should be designed in accordance with the objectives and standards of the Land Transport Safety Authority "Advertising Signs and Road Safety: Design and Location Guidelines - RTS7". (<http://www.landtransport.govt.nz/roads/rts/rts-07.pdf>)*



*Signs composed of individual letters and not placed on any backing panel are less dominating and integrate better with the building*

## 6 Design Quality

### Objective

**O6** To encourage visually interesting signs that provide a legible and clear message through the use of high quality materials and graphic design.

### Guidelines

**G6.1** New signs should:

- be visually interesting, and effectively convey information
- exhibit a high level of design detail and graphic design quality **(for the sake of this guideline, design detail relates to all aspects of the proposed sign, including materials, workmanship, detailing, installation, and lighting)**
- use high quality materials appropriate to the streetscape context and its locality

**G6.2** The backs of signs and their supporting structures should be carefully considered. Views of new signs and their supporting structures should be treated from all angles, including the street level, nearby buildings and against the skyline. If the back is seen from anywhere in the surrounding area it should be given the same design treatment and quality as the sign's 'face'. This is particularly important for free-standing or projecting signs.



*Visually interesting, innovative signage can enhance the building image and add vitality to the streetscape*

## 7 Maintenance

### Objective

**O7** To ensure signs are maintained to a high standard.

### Guideline

**G7.1** The use of high-quality materials is essential to the effectiveness of ongoing maintenance. Spending more on materials initially may bring long-term benefits and reduce maintenance costs.

*Note, a maintenance plan/strategy including proposed methods of cleaning, replacement of defective lighting and a detailed maintenance schedule can also help ensure signs are well-maintained.*

## 8 Guidelines for Specific Types of Signs

General objectives and guidelines are also relevant to specific guidelines.

### Signs and Heritage (refer also to District Plan heritage provisions, Chapters 20 and 21 )

#### Objective

**O8** To ensure that new signs do not detract from the heritage context and significance of listed heritage items.

#### Guidelines

**G8.1** Signs on or adjacent to identified heritage buildings, or within heritage areas, should be:

- consistent in scale, form, materials, colours and design with the architectural form of the building to which they are attached, and sympathetic to its context
- appropriately located on the building or site, and of a compatible type and style
- of a high standard in terms of materials, graphics, construction and detail
- an aid to identifying and understanding the heritage item, if located on the front/main building elevation
- attached to the building **with minimal intrusion into the building fabric, and** in a way that allows easy removal without damage to any significant fabric
- designed and installed in sympathy with existing signs. Existing signs with a heritage value should be retained wherever possible, preferably in their original location.



*Good example of a corporate logo/sign that is in scale and compatible with the heritage character of the building*

## 9 Illuminated/Animated Signs

Refer also to Signs and Road Safety – Objective 5.

### Objective

**O9** To ensure that illuminated and animated signs are appropriate for their context and do not compromise the amenity of nearby Residential Areas, prominent public spaces, or areas of special character or heritage value.

### Guidelines

**G9.1** Illumination levels must be set so that they do not cause glare or obtrusively impact on the neighbouring environment.

**G9.2** The cabling or equipment for any illumination/animation should be concealed and integrated with the sign (through the use of neon or internal lighting, or by well-designed and carefully located remote or spot lighting).

**G9.3** The sign should not detract from the architecture or quality of the host building or site during daylight.



*Innovative and appropriately illuminated sign that works well both during the day as well as at night*