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# **SIGN**

## **Business**

### *In This Issue:*

Trends in EGD

Signs and  
Wayfinding

Themed  
Environments

## **Environmental Graphic Design**





# More Than They Expect

By Eddie Wieber

**Subjects:** David and Robin McDonald.

**Company:** Avila Sign and Design, Grover Beach, Calif.

**Specialty:** Custom signs and sign systems.

**Years in the business:** 13.



**D**AVID McDONALD didn't think there was such a thing as a sign business. It never occurred to him that people go to a sign shop for artistic advertising to put in front of their business.

Even when he was in high school and made signs for different events, it didn't occur to him. And later, when he worked in the lumber mills and made some special signs for friends, he still didn't think of it.

And then one day the light came on. That was the day Greg and Linda Roddy came in to buy some lumber. They were in the sign business and planned to open another shop in Nipomo, Calif. They saw some of the signs McDonald had done in the area and asked if he'd be interested in working with them.

"Boy that was exciting, real exciting," recalls McDonald. "So I gave them my number and I guess about six months went by and, sure enough, they gave me a call. I put my notice in, excited as all heck, and went to work for them."

## LEARNING TO LETTER

McDonald learned what he could about lettering from Linda Roddy —

basic things like the right brushes and paints to use. Perseverance paid off as he explored different ideas and techniques.

"I had enough of that yearning," he says. "You have to have that desire, that passion. That's what has pulled me through."

He learned the concepts of layout from Mike Stevens' book, *Mastering Layout*. Recalling Stevens' influence, McDonald says, "I think what I got most from that book was his way of *defining* what we do."

He attributes to Stevens the perspective he gained in learning why something looks good or why it doesn't look good.

"I would recommend anybody starting out in our field to read that to get an insight into depth, contrast, and how things come together as a whole in a nice, eye-appealing way," he says.

The classic sign trade books from the early 1900s, (Atkinson's *Sign Painting* (1909), Henderson's *Sign Painter* (1906) and Strong's *Book of Designs* (1910) are still part of McDonald's library. Trade magazines and Letterhead meets rounded out his education.

He says he did a lot of homework in

*continued*



Dave and Robin McDonald of Avila Sign and Design, Grover Beach, California. (Photo by Forrest L. Doud.)





These signs were done as an environmental package for a client that had no signs at first. Design consistency captures the mood.



## SIGN PEOPLE

*continued*



McDonald had fun with this remake of a Pierre Rademaker design. Four layers were sandblasted into 3/4" Sign Foam®. "Bookstore" is hand carved and inset with gilded copper leaf.



A complete environmental graphics project, these signs were done in different mediums, but the design stayed consistent. The oval logo is used throughout the resort, and is well-represented by the main identification sign found on the cover of this issue.

those first couple of years. He built a small easel to put on his kitchen table that held a piece of glass.

"Every night I would letter and fill that glass up. The next day I would come home and take a razor blade and scrape off the old dry paint, and I'd letter and fill it up again," he says.

After about three years McDonald felt a strong need to express himself a little more freely. It was hard, because there was a close, almost family relationship with Greg and Linda Roddy. But they came to the mutual decision to break off, and McDonald found himself out there on his own.

"It was scary," he says. "I thought, 'Gee guys, give me a little time.' But truly it was a blessing because everything really worked out well."

After about six months of painting signs on his own, McDonald needed a

bigger place. He was checking out different areas and sign shops, asking about square feet and leases, when he happened across Avila Sign and Design.

### LABOR OF LOVE

Robin Audette wasn't a sign painter or a designer, but she did have a good feel for business. Late in 1984 when she was operating her window tinting business, the owner of the sign shop across the way asked if she'd be interested in buying him out. She thought it would be fun and a good investment, so she did it.

That's when McDonald stopped by. As he was getting ready to leave, Robin came running down the stairs to find out what he wanted. The long arm of fate nudged them, and as McDonald remembers, "One thing led to another."

"Basically, she talked me into it," he says. "She did offer me a pretty sweet

*continued*



deal, that it didn't seem I could pass up, especially when I considered a lease, materials, a bookkeeper, all my expenses, and what I really walked away with after I paid everything."

Robin's deal left him free to concentrate on designing and producing signs. She did all the prep work and bookkeeping; the business end.

That was 10 years ago. They had a good working relationship and soon became close friends. One thing led to another, and in 1993 they were married.

Avila Sign and Design is located in Grover Beach, Calif., a small beach community a couple hours up the coast from Los Angeles and about a half hour down from San Luis Obispo. It is here that Dave McDonald cuts loose, designing the sign systems that his wife and partner, Robin (now McDonald), has lined up for him.

It's a small business, with just the two of them, but it works out well. There is plenty of freedom and plenty of opportunity to be creative. It's a labor of love. And they have found clients who discriminate; who know the value of making a good impression.

Typically, Robin goes to prospective clients with two things in mind: getting as much information from them as she can, and leaving as much room as possible for McDonald to do what he wants. The approach works for everyone.

"I've got to say she does a good job," says McDonald. "I bet 90 percent of what I do is what I want. I have a format, a size I have to go by, and a price. It's not like people come in and say, 'Here's what I have and here's what you have to do.' That kind of grates with me anyway. I like to do things nice."

"As far as design, we always try to give them a little more than what they are expecting," Robin adds.

*continued*



This banner was hand painted with lettering enamel. A little extra touch gives dimension to the letters in "Lunch Buffet".



This sign was designed to blend in with the client's rustic theme and the antiques that are hanging from the ceiling and walls.



Dimension was achieved in this sign by sandblasting a 2" thick piece of foam in stages and hand carving the lettering. Latex paint was used for the colors.



## SIGN PEOPLE

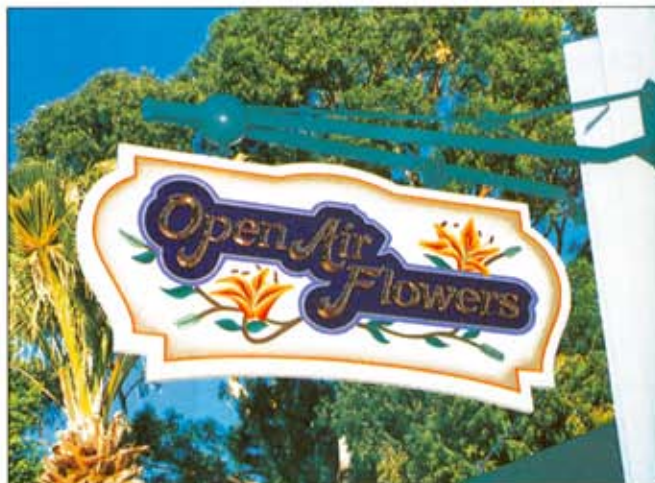
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Except for the square "J" at top, this sign was made from one piece of foam sandblasted in layers. The letters were cut out oversized, then detailed by hand. Black small in the background contrasts the gold leaf letters.



McDonald used an airbrush on medium density fiber board to illustrate this underwater environment.



The hammered copper letters on a cobalt blue small background match the metal work in this flower shop.



McDonald sandblasted this bird image in Sign Foam, then hand chiseled the letters. The background was painted a faux marble, then 23-karat gold was used to highlight the letters and border.

### CAPTURING THE MOOD

Design takes center stage at Avila Sign and Design. The environment that a sign will be in has a lot to do with how the design is approached. High priority is given to the need for it to blend in with its surroundings.

Occasionally, there may even be a need to have the owners repaint the building the sign will go on. But the main philosophy is to produce things that *belong*. From a business perspective as well as an aesthetic one, the approach makes sense.

"I tell my clients that I want people to look at the sign because it's appealing," says Robin. "Then they will read all the extra copy and informational things they need to know."

About half of the signs they produce are part of an environmental graphics package.

"We take a lot of time to make sure everything has the same mood and feel," Robin explains.



A good example is the Sea Venture job they did this year. The mood at the high-end resort is romantic and relaxing on the inside. They give you a bottle of champagne when you check in and all the rooms have a jacuzzi and a fireplace. And the place is right on the beach. So it's natural to take a barefoot walk in the sand.

In coming up with the design, McDonald captured this mood for the signs that are on the beach.

"I visualized walking through the sand; we could have sand in the background of the sign with footprints going through it," says McDonald. McDonald used Sign Foam, a material he has found to be quite versatile, to create the resort's main entry sign. He sandblasted the bulk of the sign leaving the raised letters, while outlining the footprints.

Then he chiseled the footprints by hand, rounding and smoothing them out. Sand was glued onto the background for the beach effect. The letters for *Sea Venture* were done in copper leaf, while an acrylic exterior paint added the final touch to the rest of the copy.

The same design is used throughout the resort. So the mood is captured and is consistent everywhere.

At Apple Farm, a thematic place with an inn, gift shop, gardens, and restaurant, the theme was integrated into the signs. These are all layered, sandblasted signs reminiscent of an old farm house and grist mill. Again, a consistency of design that blends with the surroundings captures the mood.

#### IT ALL COMES AROUND

The McDonalds are in love with the sign business. It gives them the artistic expression they need and affords a comfortable living.

And they are very serious about the impact their work has on the landscape. They are concerned about visual pollution. And others in the business are an inspiration.

Like Rick Glawson, a master of gold leaf.

"He knows the background that I have in gold leaf comes from him," says McDonald. "He's been the guy that's been there for me. Showing me techniques. You can tell he gets excited when he sees somebody moving along that he's taught."

After the recent 20th anniversary

Letterhead meet in Denver, they returned home with a super charge from the enthusiasm the events are known for.

McDonald summed it up with a reflection about what goes on at any given Letterhead meet.

"It all comes around. You give and you receive. I think it's the only way to keep

the trade alive and in front of the public's face, and keep it moving forward," explains McDonald. "The better the work the people around me are doing, the better work my public is going to want from me. That makes my community look better and it only better the kind of work I get to do."

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# A New Approach

BY DAVID McDONALD

*A central California commercial shop takes an electric sign to new heights during this motel makeover.*

*About the author: David and Robin McDonald own and operate a custom sign shop in Grover Beach, Calif.*

**W**E HAD THE OPPORTUNITY to take an unexceptional sign can a step further when the new owners of the Beachcomber Inn came to us with the confidence and trust that allowed us the freedom to create this breakthrough in sign expression.

I don't think that it's been thought of to approach an electrical sign using the techniques we employed on the Beachcomber Inn. When you think of an electrical sign can, you usually

think of a plexiglass face with a vinyl application; this is what would most likely be thought of when redoing an electrical sign. Such a project gave us a chance to take our ideas and put them to work.

My wife (and business partner Robin) approached me and said, "When you can find some time we really need to go and look at this job I need to bid on."

I responded by asking, "Why do you need me?" (Robin usually handles that part of things by herself quite well.)

Robin told me that this one was a little different. It was an old electrical pole sign standing about 20' high down in Pismo Beach. I assumed we were going to re-do the plexiglass faces at this point, but as I continued to ask more questions I realized that Robin was heading down an unfamiliar path.

It was raining that day and the drying time for my paint was extended a lot due to the high humidity. It seemed to me like a good time to take a break. I palleted my wet brush against the inside rim of



Photo by Steve Temple.

**The finished on-premise sign for the Beachcomber Inn: We mixed the electrical with the dimensional.**

my thinner can, grabbed one of my homemade extended clothes pins and clamped it to my faithful quill, suspending the brush carefully in clean thinner.

I called out to Robin, "Let's go have a look at that job."

We jumped into the van and headed down the road with Robin leading the way.

The rain was getting heavier by now when Robin said, "Turn left here and then park along the side of the curb". Then she said, "Can you see it?"

I was trying to see what she was so interested in. Between the rhythm of the wiper blades and the rain drops dancing on the windshield, I could see an old electrical sign, blue, and — as Robin had said — around 20' off the ground. It was not the kind of job that our shop would normally take on.

In the past, we have been involved with projects where clients would remove

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**Our re-design for the Beachcomber Inn sign.**

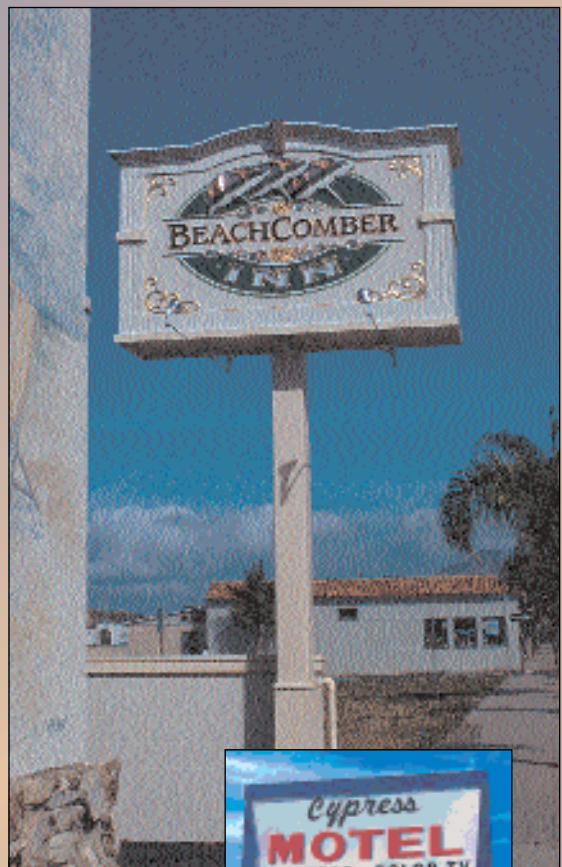




Before: Our clients purchased a seven-room motel that needed some major updating.



Before and after: The Beachcomber project was all-encompassing. We redid all of the motel's signage, creating an updated, unified look.



After: We really gave the place an overhaul, creating a fresh, clean look.

Photo by Forrest L. Dowd.



This 2' x 2' Medex hangs at the top of the Beachcomber's stairwell.



Because the motel was small — only seven rooms — we could spend the extra time to design and paint spelled-out room numbers.



## A New Approach

CONTINUED



The completed box with sheet metal crown.



I skinned the box with Sign Foam II® and finished the details.



The finished structure — primed, with cut-outs.



Robin primed the sign face.

the plexiglass faces of their electrical signs and bring them in for us to apply vinyl graphics to. This job would prove to be very different from our normal jobs.

### THE CHALLENGE

The building is a seven-room motel just recently purchased by our client. The client also had a budget to make some changes with, and was looking to Robin for advice. Exterior design consulting is something that we do quite a bit of. Taking commercial buildings and giving them a complete face lift is one of Robin's strong suits.

After considering the size of the grounds and the early '70s dated appearance of the building, Robin proposed changes. First we would select a new color scheme for the building to bring it

up to date. We then selected some color-coordinated awnings and suggested that we paint a mural on the large wall facing the main street.

Robin did some research and gave our clients a new design for their balcony's banisters and handrails. We would, of course, design a new logo and redesign the main sign out front and other secondary signage that was needed throughout the project. This included room numbers, vacancy and brochure information signage, lettering the street address on the wall, parking, *no smoking* and office signs.

These clients were very receptive to our ideas and agreed to let us go forward with our proposal. We recommended different sub-contractors that we have worked well with in the past to do their exterior painting and carpentry on the

banisters, and a local awning company.

The first step was designing the new logo, and these were my guidelines: They handed me a short strip of wall paper that had a watercolor-rendered beach scene on it for their interior wall covering. Because the motel had only seven rooms, the owners needed the logo to have a very home-like, yet regal look. They also said flowers were good. So I picked up on the umbrellas from the wall paper and went from there to achieve the finished results. The wall mural was done right from a section of the strip of wall paper that I had.

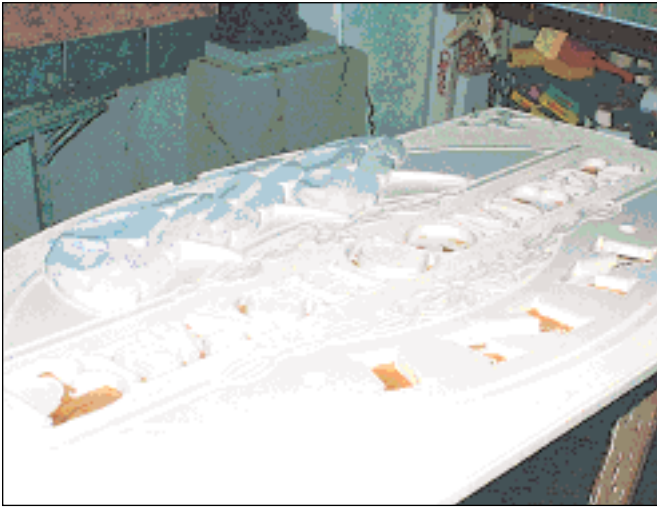
The main sign out in front would turn into quite a project. Robin suggested that we build a dimensional sign and slip it over the existing sign can. This would give the client the look they wanted. I had some major concerns right away. First off,

CONTINUED



## A New Approach

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The primed face with umbrellas.



We secured all the letter centers (Os, Bs, etc.) from behind the plexiglass.



We secured the carved umbrellas with screws from behind.



Robin applied the finished faces.

I would have to design and build a sign that was lightweight enough to be able to hang from the existing sign, but strong enough to withstand the constant pull of gravity. Being so close to the ocean, the sign would also have to withstand the elements of Mother Nature.

The sign also needed to be backlit with the existing lamps. With all of this in mind it looked as if it would be a very costly sign to design and build.

I liked Robin's idea, so I designed a structure as mentioned and the price was approved by the client. Our shop does not do many electrical signs, so I contacted a friend of mine, Steve Havens of Signtech.

Steve has a mid-sized sign shop that handles a lot of electrical signage. Signtech is located in Santa Maria, Calif., a neighboring city. We have created a

wonderful working relationship — as well as a solid personal friendship.

Signtech would be installing this sign, and Steve was also very helpful with some other aspects prior to building the structure, such as remembering to build the frame with eye bolts on top so we could lift the large unit. This is something I would not have considered.

The Beachcomber sign was designed with the logo and the architecture of the balcony in mind. The rectangular shape of the existing electrical can was too sharp for me and I felt it needed to be softened a little. I rendered the silhouette with a decorative crown and added an arch to the top. This seemed to do the trick.

I added some flutes down the sides, imported the logo with color, and was ready to present it. The clients loved it and it was now ready to be built.

## THE ANSWER

I started with a frame built with 2 x 4 and 2 x 2 cedar. The frame's inside dimension would need to measure 1" larger than the existing sign can because this would be the part that would slide over the can. With the weight being a factor, it went down like this: two identical 2 x 4 box frames separated with 2 x 2 risers on the four corners, all screwed and glued using West System's two part epoxy.

Next, I skinned the frame with 1/2" exterior grade plywood. This was kind of tricky because the box measured about 9' long x 6' high and 30" deep; it was too big for your standard 4' x 8' material, so I had to fasten larger pieces together. I elected to fasten these pieces first, then attach them to the frame using screws and epoxy. I now had the complete box

CONTINUED



## A New Approach

CONTINUED

enclosed on five sides and open at the bottom.

The arch on the top of the box came next. I used some pieces of plywood left over from the box and scribed the radius with a large homemade compass. I cut these half-moon shapes on the band saw and attached them to the top with 2 x 2 cleats, then I screwed and glued them. I measured the length and width needed to cover the arch and had a piece of sheet metal cut to fit. The metal was etched with acid and primed, screwed and epoxied to the radius of the arch.

The foundation of the unit was complete and it was time to dress it up cosmetically; my material of choice was Sign Foam II®. My reasons for choosing the high-density urethane foam were multiple: It is lightweight (which is extremely important), very durable and its ease of workability is a major plus.

Two sign faces were designed to be removed for accessibility; the future maintenance of the electrical make-up and lamps were essential. A pattern was made for the faces and cut from 15 lb., 1" urethane foam.

The faces were then positioned carefully on the box and I scribed around them with a Stabilo. At this time, I could set the faces aside.



We used 23-karat gold leaf as well as copper and aluminum leaf, and transparent color glaze.

Next, I skinned the outer border of the faces and sides of the box with 10 lb., 3/4" urethane foam. I wanted the actual finished face to be recessed 3/4", so the surrounding area was treated with another 1" layer of 10 lb. urethane foam. Some of these pieces were fluted as designed; all were screwed and glued with epoxy.

The top cap was applied next. It needed to measure 8" more in length and width to accommodate the crown molding that would be anchored underneath. The crown moldings were then cut and shaped from various widths of urethane foam and fastened with finish nails and epoxied underneath the cap.

thane foam and fastened with finish nails and epoxied underneath the cap.

Next I applied a 1" trim around the mid-section and around the bottom. The final touch to the dimension of the box was the ~~keys~~ placed on both sides of the arch. To make these, I scribed the profile of the crown molding, then trimmed and carved them for a nice fit. Then I epoxied them into place.

All of the screw heads and seams were filled with Bondo. We decided to go for an extra effect. We would treat the rest of the viewable areas with Bondo to achieve a nice texture; this would look nice and hide any imperfections.

Robin painted the box with acrylic latex in the selected colors. At this time I jumped back onto the sign faces. I registered the pattern and pounced the art work on to the faces. I cut out all of the letters so that the internal lamps would shine through at night. This was all done using a jigsaw. All of the letters centers were saved, such as the As and Os. These would be reattached later.

The same pattern was laid onto a piece of 2" urethane foam, and the umbrellas were pounced and cut out with a jig saw. They were marked #1 and #2. This would assure that they ended up on the right face. A sandblast resist was laid down onto the faces and the pattern was registered and pounced. At this point, each umbrella was matched to its appropriate sign face. Then I drew around each umbrella with a Stabilo. This Stabilo line



Here's a closeup of the transparent color over the aluminum leaf.

CONTINUED



## A New Approach

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We made a new No Vacancy sign with a special pocket for displaying brochures.

is cut rather than the pounced line; this ensures a perfect match after sandblasting. The rest of the artwork was hand cut and the excess stencil removed, ready to be sandblasted.

After the sandblasting was completed, I hand carved the flowers and flourishes. The faces were then treated with two coats of oil-based primer, followed by two coats of acrylic latex paint.

The outline around the word *inn* and the flourishes on the border are 23-karat gold leaf. The flowers were surface gilded with aluminum leaf then treated with transparent color glazes. The outline around *Beachcomber* as well as the vines of the flowers are copper leaf. They were carved for a hammered appearance.

The umbrellas were treated separately with acrylic exterior latex, then surface gilded with copper and aluminum leaf with a color glaze over the aluminum.

The next step was to apply the plexiglass to the back side of the faces. First we cut the plexiglass to size, then registered it onto the urethane foam faces. Next, I roughly marked where the letters of *Beachcomber* were. Then the green translucent vinyl was applied to these marked areas. The plexiglass was glued



This 10" x 24" No Smoking sign was made from Medex.



In keeping with the motel's theme, we painted an eye-catching mural on the wall facing the street — a busy one with lots of foot traffic.

in place with silicone and left to dry overnight.

The next day, the centers of all closed letters were screwed and siliconed in place from behind. The umbrellas were matched to the right faces then permanently attached using screws and epoxy. The faces were ready to be installed to the box.

We chose to simply use stainless steel screws and screw directly into the box rather than using a threaded fastener system. The electrical would be serviced by removing one of the sign faces, and we estimated that in a ten-year period we were probably looking at the sign being serviced around five or six times, and that mounting with screws would be adequate.

CONTINUED



With the faces installed we could now step back and admire our work.

### THE INSTALLATION

*Installation* — now that's a scary word. After all the work that had gone into this project, it was now time to attach chains to the eye bolts that were in the top of the sign, and to hoist it with a crane 30' in the air and gently lower it over a 20-year-old structure.

Steve Fear from Signtech arrived at my shop early in the morning with his bucket truck ready to install the sign. We wheeled the sign outside and Steve attached it to the bucket of his truck. The idea was to lift the sign and I would drive my truck under it. Then the sign would be lowered into the bed of my truck. Although it barely fit, it was successful.

We arrived at the site and Steve reattached the sign, raised it out of my truck,

and then attached some ropes underneath the sign. I would be holding these ropes from the ground as kind of a steering wheel to help guide the sign over the target zone. Steve is very good at what he does. With one smooth motion he had no problem finding the target. With butterflies in my stomach, I watched as Steve Fear (or should I say *No Fear*) fine tuned the sign's adjustment and released the chains. I felt as if a ton of bricks were removed from my chest; it was done!

The only thing left to do was button up the sign from the bottom. We had rented a lift to assist with the mural and Steve and I were able to work from this to install the bottom cap. This part of the project was now complete.

The informational signage was designed with consistency in mind, once again employing the same color scheme. The backgrounds were textured dark to

light and vinyl lettering was used. The welcome sign for the hallway was more involved — with hand lettering — but the same theme was carried out.

Even the room number signs had the same feel. There were only seven rooms so we choose to spell out the numbers. I would not recommend this method for a larger motel! We also created a *No Vacancy* sign, and in case you didn't notice, we removed it from the old pole sign. The new one was moved to the office. It also has a removable *No* plaque that is attached with Velcro®. On this sign there is an additional slot for brochures.

We found this job and our approach to it to be very successful and self rewarding. I hope that our techniques and ideas can be of some inspiration to you. SB