

The Sign at 50

Against the odds, Las Vegas' fabulous greeting is still its most iconic design.

By Phil Hagen

Adjectives are fleeting words. They come attached not only to nouns but moments. So when Betty Willis inserted “Fabulous” into her “Welcome to Las Vegas” sign design 50 years ago, it was in the spirit of how she felt about the place back then. And no one will tell you that she didn’t nail it.

But times change everywhere, always—and then there’s the Las Vegas Strip. The chances of Betty’s sign surviving a half-century of contextual shifts of that magnitude were slim. So the fact that it is not only standing but has managed to maintain much of its meaning—and most of its dignity—is something of a miracle.

Betty’s sign went up at the southern end of Las Vegas Boulevard in 1959, at the height of the Rat Pack’s reign and pretty much everything else that made mid-century America cool: the automobile, the neon sign, googie architecture, postwar optimism, young Elvis. And the destination that welcomed you was a fabulously hip and sunny fusion of those ideals without the daily grind of truth.

Through the years, the Strip has remained a funhouse mirror of American culture, which begins to explain why it’s the most mutable commercial corridor on Earth. Today it’s a baroque amalgam of ideas old and new, from medieval megaresort to lean urban chic. And everybody—everybody who counts—agrees that the place is still fabulous, even though little of it resembles what inspired Betty.

The sign still works, and not as a mere relic. (Las Vegas, you may have noticed, doesn’t like to keep souvenirs of itself.) It works by keeping a little distance from the Strip’s continuous southward expansion. Aesthetically, that’s how it functions best—all by itself along a desert highway. And pragmatically, well, there’s no point to a welcome sign if you’ve already arrived. The periodic relocation of Betty’s work has been necessary to maintain space between her adjectival boast and what’s going on in the noun behind it. You, the driver, need a minute to absorb the message and its aura while zooming by, to let the anticipation of *Fabulous* Las Vegas build, in a mental calibration of personal fantasy as it’s about to collide with society’s. Both you and the sign need that buffer.

The downside is that not many tourists cruise into Vegas this way anymore. Our American car culture has gone from an art to an addiction, born of the insatiable interstate program, also from the 1950s. Eventually, we decided to bypass roads like Las Vegas

Boulevard. Once the ultimate cruising strip, its architecture is no longer scaled for the car, and its signage has become as glitzy as a CEO's nameplate.

With Interstate 15 the main way to get in and out of Vegas, you have to make an effort to see the sign these days, and, for better and for worse, flocks of silly tourists do, because it's one of the last photo ops that truly certifies a Vegas vacation for the ages. There's even a little parking lot, so high-heeled brides don't have to sprint across three lanes to the site. But Betty's design was not meant to be parked by and gawked at from a gravelly median, and it certainly wasn't meant to be showcased behind a metal safety fence. The Fabulous Las Vegas sign, at 25 feet tall by 20 feet wide, was built for speed. And in your fondest memory, you come upon it at dusk so that this twinkling little burst of anticipation is set against the remnants of a Western day, and you breeze into the ultimate desert oasis just as it's powering up for a long night.

But when is the last time you saw the sign like that? Funny how it has endured apart from its intended seductive welcoming, how its physical appeal long ago transcended roadside function. One of the most duplicated icons since the Statue of Liberty, it shows up just about everywhere—key chains, snow globes, covers of personalized wedding mint tins. Although some of this is driven by the fact that Betty's design, which was never copyrighted, is free to steal, it's mostly because the design itself is truly fabulous.

All of the elements work together in an organized chaos that makes the googie style so endearing. The wide white diamond, for example, needs the slim blue rectangle not only for support and geometrical contrast but also to float the starburst slightly, and ever so delicately, off to the side. And in the center of it all is the word "Fabulous," which is purposely not the biggest word (that's reserved for you-know-what), but it is the most stylized.

Font gurus have blogged about the origin of this scripted typeface, concluding that it must have been hand-painted by the artist, that it is not a member of some font family. Should it be such a surprise in the age of the Internet that such originality, such spontaneity, once existed? Maybe. Perhaps this relates to the sign's true test of design durability—that it was recently replicated to welcome visitors to the city's "Fabulous Downtown" as well as to the less-than-fabulous "Boulder Strip."

Flattery in the form of imitation may be sincere, but just look around—Las Vegas does that all the time. Not being able to reinvent something that defines the idea of Las Vegas itself? Now that's almost impossible to believe.