Signs of Summer Avenue: Assessing the Efficacy of Form-Based Sign Design in Memphis, Tennessee

Emily Gwyn Balton

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SIGNS OF SUMMER AVENUE: ASSESSING THE EFFICACY OF FORM-BASED SIGN DESIGN IN MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

by

Emily Gwyn Balton

A Thesis
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

Major: Art
Concentration: Graphic Design

The University of Memphis
May 2023
Abstract

Form-based design regulations and municipality codes intended for urban environments have become increasingly popular methods for planning and development since their emergence in the 1980s. Regulations and codes provide business stakeholders, developers, communities, and governments with guidelines and tools to produce reliably high-quality urban design. Signage takes on a prominent role in adding to or taking away from the experience of an urban environment. Form-based design seeks to alleviate this by creating uniformity and harmony within built environments. Studies have shown that most sign codes in America have not been updated in the last twenty years. Through document reviews I compare the existing sign codes of the city with signage that exists under its regulation. I assess the current state of sign code efficacy in Memphis, Tennessee, define signage design problems, and offer potential solutions with form-based structures in mind using a multi-tenant building on Summer Avenue as an example.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Background

Studies have shown that signage takes on a significant role in the first impression individuals have on an urban, built environment and that commercial signage can positively or negatively impact the public’s ability to perceive information and recall memories of urban places (Portella 21). Commercial signs are naturally designed to “attract consumers, visitors, and investors,” as that is their primary function (Portella 96). However, they can result in a conflict of purpose as businesses compete, creating what previous research has considered to be visual pollution, or an over-population of visual stimuli in a public environment—a problem magnified by too much variety in signage in the form of quantity, material type, scale in relation to neighboring signs and architecture, color palettes, typographic styles, and placements on facades (Portella 2). Community perception of commercial signage with ineffective sign regulation are shown to be considered “ugly, boring, and disordered” while effective regulations are typically deemed, “beautiful, interesting, and ordered by users from different cultural backgrounds” (Portella 388). To mitigate visual pollution, cities across the United States incorporate sign ordinances in their local government’s Code of Ordinances. According to conservation organizations such as WeConservePA, a sign ordinance is defined as a legal framework that “can help a municipality reduce the visual clutter of signage and end business sign wars” and “protect, establish, or enhance community identity” (Lotze). Sign code has dramatically evolved since the 1980s with the emergence of what is known as form-based code, which has gained continued interest not only for planning cohesive signage design plans, but also for the built urban and community environments (buildings, streets, landscape) that all seek to coexist in harmony
The direct definition of form-based codes as provided by the Form-based Institute is as follows, “a land development regulation that fosters predictable built results and a high-quality public realm by using physical form (rather than separation of uses) as the organizing principle for the code” (“Form-Based Codes Defined”). The goal of form-based codes is to “create good urban design and architectural character by focusing on design rather than use” as was the standard in previous conventional zoning codes that have been shown to “segregate the development by land use into residential, commercial, and industrial categories” (P. Crawford et al. 200).

Form-based codes for designing urban areas provide a verbal and visual pairing of the codified regulations, helping business owners and developers to better visualize and ultimately realize the community vision for built environments. Built environments are public, urban features that include everything from infrastructure for traffic safety and streetscapes (medians, walkways, sidewalks, and other amenities for aesthetic and functional features to make public spaces walkable and safe), commercial architecture, shared spaces for community members, and a sensitivity toward residential neighborhoods near these mixed-use urban areas (P. Crawford et al. 201). With the increasing popularity of form-based codes for urban spaces and community-driven placemaking, commercial signage has become a topic of discussion as communities begin to look for ways to mitigate aging infrastructure as ways of life begin to change and outdate previous city planning initiatives. Previous studies have shown that form-based sign codes can improve the general public’s impressions of an urban area by reducing visual pollution (the sense of a place being too overloaded with uncoordinated visual stimuli) and increase satisfaction with their overall experiences (which encompasses wayfinding, legibility, and visual harmony in
signage). “decrease the negative consequences […] such as visual pollution, increased user satisfaction, and positive perceptions of urban streetscapes” (P. Crawford et al. 202).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to gauge the potential and goodness of fit for expanding form-based sign regulations in Memphis, Tennessee (specifically throughout stretches of Summer Avenue) as it relates to common urban design theories and practices. With sign ordinances being the legal frameworks that local government enact to ensure signs follow a basic guideline of characteristics (which primarily deal with form, function, quantity, and placements over aesthetics), I believe there is an opportunity to improve sign regulations that will benefit communities throughout the city that are under-represented. Form-based approaches to sign regulation consider the traits of nearby landscape, architectural features, and generally seek to provide balanced uniformity through the design, size, and type of signage (P. Crawford et al. 202). When it comes to developing new (or re-developing existing) commercial areas, the goal is to reduce visual pollution and related distractions that dampen positive public perceptions of a place. Visual pollution could be considered anything from rundown eyesores (both in signage and architecture) as well as an overabundance of “visual noise” or “visual information” such as cluttered signage, mismatched typography, over-sized or visually intrusive signage that can disrupt the perceived quality of an urban area and its surrounding communities.

**Significance of the Study**

Previous studies have acknowledged the need to balance both uniformity and uniquness in sign design systems to maintain effective urban placemaking without compromising the identity of surrounding social and cultural qualities of a city’s streetscape (Kim). By examining and assessing the state of existing signage and current use of form-based signage systems (or lack
thereof) in commercial centers of Memphis, I believe transferrable data from observational studies can be used to identify problem areas within existing sign code and assist in developing more effective signage regulations within the city.

I will research sign codes for districts within Memphis to compare the existing use of regulated sign design practices over less regulated zones, looking for weak points in the sign codes that can negatively impact visual pollution or create disharmony in urban environments. I will include photographic observations of shopping centers in parts of the city (East Memphis, Downtown, and Midtown Memphis) to showcase different approaches to managing multi-tenant signage aesthetics and how they may or may not be implementing form-based sign design systems for groups of tenants in commercial districts.

This study will help identify design problems within the sign industry and code regulation occurring in Memphis. Comparing citywide sign codes to district-specific sign codes will help identify strengths and weaknesses in sign design outcomes, and can serve as a steppingstone toward redeveloping a citywide sign code that protects communities from visual pollution and blight.

**Summary of Memphis and Shelby County**

To briefly encapsulate Memphis, it is the second largest city in Tennessee next to the capitol of Nashville based on the Census Bureau calculations in July 2021 and falls within Shelby County governing district of the southwest most corner of the state (U.S. Census Bureau). The Shelby County government website denotes that the county was established in 1819 and the “state’s largest county both in terms of population and geographic area,” covering “783 square miles, 317 of which are within the city limits of Memphis” (“Shelby County Geography”). The Shelby County Government includes Arlington, Bartlett, Collierville, Germantown, Lakeland,
Memphis, Millington, and all unincorporated areas as that fall within the covered radius. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that Shelby County consists of 924,454 individuals as of July 2021 and the racial makeup of the population being 54.6% Black or African American, 40.4% White, 6.9% Hispanic or Latino, 2.9% Asian, 1.7% two or more races, .4% American Indian and Alaska Native, and .1% Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander. Additionally, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that as of 2020, the total employer establishments in the county were 19,622, and as of 2017 that 7,685 of those were owned by men, 2,381 by women, 2,233 by minorities, and 9,112 by non-minorities (U.S. Census Bureau). I am including this information to showcase the expansiveness of Shelby County and the diversity it brings to community and business sectors and because these are the individuals and businesses that are all regulated under the Memphis-Shelby County Unified Code of Development—wherein we will be exploring specific sign code regulations.

Memphis has its own code of ordinances in place (that do, in some cases, offer variations in sign code that affect specific regions within the city limits), but ultimately adheres to the Memphis-Shelby County Unified Code of Development and its regulations on signage. This means that, for the city of Memphis, the regulation of signage falls largely upon the ordinance upheld by the Shelby County Government unless otherwise stated in specified districts. There are two provisions in the Memphis code of ordinances that offer specific sign regulations: The Central Improvement Business District (CBID) and the University District Overlay (UDO)—both of which offer intensive signage guidelines and regulations that do not apply to the rest of the city’s zones. This will be discussed with more in-depth looks at their mission, functionality, and individualized sign codes.
Memphis & Shelby County Ordinances

The Shelby County Government describes its code of ordinances as “the laws of Shelby County and are applicable in the unincorporated areas of Shelby County” that are adopted by the legislative body, the Shelby County Board of Commissioners (“Adopting an Ordinance”). For an ordinance to become official, it must be drafted and read in an open session of said board of commissioners on three separate occurrences, pass a majority vote, and if it gets a passing vote—it will then move forward to the county mayor for approval and signature. Should the ordinance pass these steps, it becomes law after 15 days or returns to the Board of Commissioners. If it is rejected, it must receive revision and re-enactment within a thirty-day period to move forward, requiring the majority vote from the Board of Commissioners again plus an additional vote from a board member. Some ordinances require a two-thirds majority vote from the board both before the mayor’s review and after a potential veto from the mayor (which can be overridden by another two-thirds vote by the board). Additionally, should the mayor provide no affirming or denial action for or against an ordinance, it becomes law after 10 days (“Adopting an Ordinance”).

As part of this code of ordinance, signage throughout Shelby County is regulated within the Shelby County Unified Development Code: The Zoning Code and Subdivision Regulations for the City of Memphis and Unincorporated Shelby County in Chapter 1 Section 4.9: Signs. The last major revision to The Memphis and Shelby County Unified Development Code was in 2010. The American Planning Association describes the code as,

[…] a mix of use-based and form-based zoning standards. It defines and regulates uses based on broad categories, with select specific use types, and includes use-specific standards to minimize reliance on discretionary use permits.
It is richly illustrated and uses tables to organize use permissions and dimensional standards (American Planning Association).

**Memphis and Shelby County Sign Code**

While each of these zones and cities are their own entities with their own regulations, age/history, and demographics—design industry leaders and manufacturers of signage are a common link between each of these zones. It is not uncommon that a designer, sign company, or business owner located in any one of these zones also does business across adjacent city ordinances (especially on behalf of sign manufacturers offering their services across an expansive radius). While a business owner may own property in two separate zoning ordinances, a sign company or designer would typically be involved in the legal aspects of adhering to regulation and implementation of requirements set forth by local governments. This is done in the early design process of signage, and then carried into the permitting phase, wherein the sign company will apply for a legal permit that is reviewed by the local government in accordance to sign code. to manufacture and install signage at a designated location, providing the Downtown Memphis Commission (DRC) and subsequent Downtown Review Board (DRB) with the proposed signage artwork, build specifications, and detailed site measurements associated with sign ordinance regulation. The DRC and DRB are integral organizations that work to maintain the historic districts of Downtown Memphis while fostering purposeful growth that serves a larger community vision for the future of Memphis. I will go into depth regarding the purpose and functionality of these organizations in the review of the Central Business Improvement District.

As mentioned, Memphis signage falls under the guidance of the Shelby County Unified Development Code, and regulations on the topic can be found in Chapter 1, Section 4 through 8
with information that outlines zoning boundaries, outlines permitting processes and requirements, dictates square footage/quantity/placement restrictions for commercial signage and so forth. Most of the city depends on the Memphis/Shelby County Unified Code Development document for its sign code, though there are a few locations within the city that adhere to a variation in the standard code. Figure 1 includes zones within the city of Memphis such as “Inside Parkway” or Zone 1, “City and Unicorp County” or Zone 3, and “Inside I-40, I-55, and I-240” or Zone 2, which encompasses the primary area in which I am observing existing sign codes that could potentially benefit from more regulation. Within these areas, the Shelby County zoning map breaks land categorizations up into three districts: Open, Residential, Residential Work, Office General (OG), and Commercial and Industrial Zoning Districts (“The Memphis and Shelby County Unified Development Code” 14). Within the city of Memphis, there are two districts with their own sign codes, the Central Business Improvement District as shown in Figure 2 and the other is the University District Overlay in Figure 3.

In 4.9.7 Regulations Applicable to Permanent Signs by Zoning District for commercial mixed-use zones (like those on Summer Avenue), some notable allowances are as follows. Signs within the Commercial/Mixed Use and Industrial Districts (not including OG and RW) do not have a regulation in place for maximum sizing of attached wall signs (otherwise described as any sign physically attached to a building façade). The quantity of signage for commercial districts is listed as five signs per standalone building (two allotted for wall signage and the remaining for on-premise pole or monument signage), one sign per each ground floor shopping center tenant, and one per each ground-floor tenant in buildings that have multiple stories and allows for one rooftop sign. There is no indication that buildings with multiple tenants need to have uniform size requirements in relation to frontage length, nor is there a specified requirement that signage
existing in the same shopping center need be made of like materials or installed in unison with horizontal sight lines across building facades (“The Memphis and Shelby County Unified Development Code” 230).

**Figure 1.** Map of Shelby County Sign Zones. Courtesy of Memphis and Shelby County Unified Development Code, accessed 10 April 2023, https://shelbycountytn.gov/DocumentCenter/View/30663/ZTA-17-002-Sign-code-itself-revised-3?bidId=.

Central Business Improvement District

Chapter 12-36 in the City of Memphis Code of Ordinances covers the Central Business Improvement District (CBID) sign code, but it is important to note that at this time the sections indicate that the CBID sign code will no longer be specifically listed in the Code of Ordinances (though will be self-regulated and upheld through the Downtown Review Commission and associated design review boards. For the purposes of this observational study, I will focus on the
sign code as it stands prior to the adoption as the existing signage covered in the area would have been designed under its guidance. The code was written in 2000, twenty-three years prior to the time at which this study is taking place. The current sign code defines its purpose as an integral part in maintaining quality urban design and walkable streetscapes while respecting the history and functionality of the communities represented within the CBID. The CBID sign code goes on to break up its district area even further, and supplies individualized guidance and regulation accordingly. The ordinance justifies this reasoning as an effort to protect and enhance the historical features of downtown Memphis and enhance the walkability of pedestrian-oriented streetscapes with its design guidelines (“A Codification of the General Ordinances of Memphis, Tennessee,” § 12-36). An integral organization that upholds the historic nature of downtown Memphis is the Memphis Landmarks Commission.

The Memphis Landmarks Commission (locally referred to as The Landmarks Commission or MLC) is “responsible for preserving and protecting the historic, architectural and cultural landmarks in the City of Memphis” (Develop 901). The Landmarks Commissions consists of nine mayor-appointed members and approved by the Memphis City Council, functioning to review “zoning requests and work that is visible from the street, including new construction, demolition, relocation of structures, and different types of exterior alterations in the historic districts” (Develop 901). The sign code then moves on to outline the design review process in detail as well as a general framework of sign design guidelines, size, quantity, placement restrictions, breakdowns of individualized code exceptions per each zone designated within the CBID and permitting information.
To sum up some of the major sections for on-premises sign design as it relates to the study, the general sign standards call for businesses to identify their business name (not for “advertisement of services or products”), requirements for removal of signage after a business’ closing, rules on repair or removal of damaged or structurally failing signs, limits on graphic elements (kept under ten), quantity of signs (ground floor tenants are allowed up to two, but both will count toward a total square footage allotment that is dependent upon length of building frontage on public right-of-way), restricting wall signage to 40% of “signable area” otherwise shown as the free-space designed on a building that provides designated space for signage, as well as size restrictions on projecting signs (signs that extend out from a wall, overhanging sidewalks) (“A Codification of the General Ordinances of Memphis, Tennessee,” § 12-36-6).

The sign code goes into depth on the previously mentioned topics, but I want to point out a couple of important takeaways. The requirements for businesses to remove their signs from a building after closure reduces the risk of a future business coming in and re-purposing the previous signage with potentially ill-fitting graphics (example: should an incoming business name be longer or shorter than available area, design concessions may be made and result in an awkward fit). While the CBID sign code has a review board in place (which will be explained in the coming sections) that can provide as a failsafe for mitigating poor design choices—this code reduces the possibility that a sign will be passed down after many years of use (prolonging a lifespan that could become a safety issue). Additionally, the disrepair clause in the ordinance ensures that, should any sign exist on-premises for enough years to fall into
decay or disfunction—there are regulations in place to ensure it does not become a visual pollution or blight issue.

Upon its appeal, the code will, as it states in *Chapter 12-44. - Central Business Improvement District II*, the new code does not go into depth regarding sign code, but states that it has the right to:

[…] adopt, promulgate, establish, enforce and amend from time to time written rules and regulations governing the design of building facades and exteriors in public view, signs and all other improvements, public or private, located within such parts of district II as shall be determined by the commission from time to time, including without limitation, different rules and regulations for different parts or neighborhoods within district II, a violation of such rules and regulations is declared to be a misdemeanor subject to punishment as provided in section 1-24-1; (“A Codification of the General Ordinances of Memphis, Tennessee,” § 12-44-7E).

This would mean that any existing sign code (or modification of such) would remain in place. And, as far as maintaining regulatory boards and appointment of design review board members (or, in this case, the retention of the existing status-quo of such entities), the code gives leeway by stating the following:

To establish a design review board or other similar body to make recommendations to the commission regarding regulations to be promulgated with respect to the design of public building facades and exteriors in public view, signs and other public improvements located
within district II and to review applications for and issue permits for such building facades and exteriors in public view, signs and other improvements; ("A Codification of the General Ordinances of Memphis, Tennessee," § 12-44-7F).

The CBID district is managed by a design review commission that oversees the development of guidelines, codes, design approvals, and general regulation of the vision for the downtown Memphis experience. So, while the sign code will be removed with the repeal, it will remain in place and overseen by the Memphis Landmarks Commission, Downtown Memphis Commission, and associated Design Review Board.

The Central Business Improvement District is managed by the Downtown Memphis Commission (DMC) is an organization that “drives Downtown’s role as the economic, cultural, and governmental core of our city and country” and funded by “an assessment on commercial property” located within the CBID and “reinvested into funding incentives and activations designed to support the growth of both Downtown’s population and appraised property values” (Downtown Memphis Commission). With relation to signage regulation, there is a Design Review Board (DRB) included in the organization with seven voting members on its board and one non-voting consultant that all take part in receiving and reviewing signage applications during the permitting process of obtaining approval to manufacture and install signage in their designated jurisdiction. The DMC is responsible for the existing sign ordinances that help shape the public spaces and experiences of the CBID.

In the comprehensive Downtown Memphis Design Guideline and Principles, the DRB includes a specific in-depth chapter on signage regulations intended to preserve the authenticity, history, and welcoming aesthetic and experience intended to draw in visitors to the downtown
area. The document introduces its signage regulations as an integral part of the process for approving signage either presented in public spaces within CBID or gaining financial support from DMC incentives. Furthermore, it serves as a road map for assessing the quality and goodness of fit of signs that are more sculptural in nature, and ultimately serves as an informational guide for stakeholders to make the best decisions in terms of design and overall quality in build and aesthetic (Downtown Memphis Commission, et al. 127). The chart in Figure 4 is included as a general FAQ resource provided by the DMC in conjunction with the Office of Planning and Development, was designed in such a way to assist in the making appropriate signage decisions based on the context of place and purpose, and provides a roadmap for businesses to determine if their sign must be reviewed by Memphis Landmarks or the DRC. These guidelines and documents are intended to help stakeholders navigate the process of designing signage that compliments the community vision while accommodating complicated code requirements.
Not only do the CBID guidelines visually break down signage regulations with visuals and infographics, but also offer the framework for “a regulatory document that includes limits on the number and size of signs, type, illumination and general placement” with brief
summaries of each as well as visual examples of how each play into the downtown and CBID districts (Downtown Memphis Commission, et al. 127). This ties directly into some of the general qualities of form-based codes mentioned in the literature review. The important thing that differentiates the CBID sign regulations and others in the city of Memphis is the incorporation of this comprehensive guideline that preserves the authenticity and quality of Downtown Memphis. It outlines the importance of signage and addresses design problems surrounding new and existing architecture, streetscapes, and public placemaking guidelines that all work together to preserve aesthetics, historic qualities, and maintain a level of uniqueness as well as diversity without sacrificing quality and safety in signage designs. Furthermore, the implementation of the Design Review Board adds another layer of approval and inspection of signage design and planning, allowing there to be a discussion regarding the goals as set out in their set of guidelines drafted for the Central Business Improvement District.

While the CBID provides the most comprehensive look at how oversight and guidance can be structured to provide quality control, it also shows the importance of educating would-be stakeholders opening businesses in the area. Without documents guiding informed decision-making, most businesses enter the sign planning phase under-informed to make the best design selections not only for their businesses, but for the surrounding aesthetic, cultural, and functional urban landscape that they are becoming an active part of. Providing written and visual examples of appropriate signage is the first step toward stakeholders visualizing sign designs that can represent the authentic character of businesses, communities, and physical surroundings alike. Figure 5 below shows an example of how these design guidelines come into play in fostering thoughtful design: The Brass Door signage integrates itself with the surrounding architecture while still expressing the individual characteristics of the business. This serves as an example of
balancing unique signage, fostering placemaking through memorable design, and honoring adjacent aesthetics of streetscapes and urban forms. Figure # shows a series of three tenants occupying commercial storefronts, showing a sensitivity toward uniform materials and installation locations on shared building frontage.

Figure 5. The Brass Door Sign in CBID.

Figure 6. Multi-tenant frontage in CBID.

**University District Overlay**

The University District Overlay (UDO) encompasses a commercial and residential area adjacent to the University of Memphis. The boundary was approved in 2009, and subsequent planning and guidelines for development was initiated in conjunction with Memphis and Shelby County Office of Planning and Development and the University Neighborhoods Development
Corporation (UNDC), creating a “new zoning district within which rehabilitation and new construction projects were encouraged to align with the district’s existing building form, scale, and use” (The University of Memphis City & Regional Planning 90). In 2019, the Highland Strip area within the UDO underwent a redevelopment planning phase with urban design and mindful streetscape taken into consideration. The efforts were driven by the UNDC, a non-profit organization that defines itself as seeking “to build a thriving campus and community environment by improving the physical and economic infrastructure of the neighborhoods surrounding the University of Memphis” (University of Memphis). This revitalization project is part of UNDC’s Highland Street Improvements Project – Phase 1, which was completed in 2022 after construction began in November 2021 under a partnership with architecture and urban planning company Looney Ricks Kiss (LRK) and investments of $6 million toward “new public infrastructure, […] signalized crosswalks, sidewalks, medians, intersection upgrades, landscaping, utility relocations, and other traffic calming devices” (“Highland Street Improvements Project”). While signage is not specifically addressed in this development (it focuses on architecture and streetscapes), the UDO signage guidelines that were put into place align with the same community-driven and form-based vision that urban planning efforts are addressing. Figures 7-11 showcase signage located on the Highland Strip as it exists in April 2023, which include a combination of LED illuminated channel letters on raceways (see Figure 8 and Figure 9) and neon signage (see Figure 10 and Figure 11).

The interdisciplinary approach and intentionality of the UNDC approach is reflected in the section of the district-specific codes in the Memphis-Shelby County Unified Development Code. The regulations include a series of more comprehensive design regulations, suggestions, and general notes or guidelines for consideration that set it apart from the standard code. The
purpose of the district is stated as an effort to “preserve and reinforce the University District by encouraging rehabilitation and new construction that is sensitive to the urban form and reflects appropriate uses, scales, and character of the neighborhoods (“The Memphis and Shelby County Unified Development Code” 337). The code goes on to define types of signage, define minor exemptions, but particularly important to the scope of this study: includes a series of customized design regulations for signage located within the UDO zone to adhere by.

Much like the CBID sign code, UDO general sign standards go into depth with a full list of signage types and definitions of each, outlines exemptions (for example, signs out of sight from the public right-of-way or located in unseen interior spaces). The regulations include the number of allowed storefront signs, construction materials and illumination types, installation placement, overall sizes, maintenance/repair/removal requirements for the tenants throughout the district. These regulations are intended to maintain the community vision, user experience, and promote quality control for the built environments that signage interacts with.

Figure 7. Highland Strip Store Frontages.
Figure 8. Highland Strip—Adjacent Tenants with LED channel letters.

Figure 9. Highland Strip—Adjacent Tenants with LED channel letters (additional).

Figure 10. Highland Strip tenant with neon signage.
Memphis 3.0 and Summer Avenue

In 2019, the Memphis 3.0 Comprehensive Plan “established a new vision for Memphis’ growth and development, to ‘Build Up, Not Out’ and unified land use, transportation, and economic plans with bold new strategies for the city” (City of Memphis Comprehensive Planning Department, et. al 6). The Memphis 3.0 mission was drafted in by the City of Memphis and Shelby County Division of Planning and Development and “provides a comprehensive vision to support existing residents, attract new residents and visitors, and reduce some of the inequities the city has faced since the last general plan was completed in 1981” (“Memphis 3.0 Comprehensive Plan” 11). The comprehensive, interdisciplinary development of this plan addresses the past, present, and future development plans of Memphis with research-driven information. It acknowledges the need for including the community in the planning and development process, reflecting their priorities and commitment to improving the city structure for the betterment of built-environment functionality (such as roads, streetscapes, housing, public transportation and healthy land use and development for future sustainability). As of 2023, there are eleven ongoing development projects actively happening under the Memphis 3.0 and Division of Planning and Development objectives. In this planning strategy, a 5.5 mile section of
Summer Avenue between East Parkway and I-40 are targeted for community-driven improvements to infrastructure and redevelopment.

In June of 2022, the City of Memphis Comprehensive Planning Department along with the Division of Planning & Development and Tennessee Department of Transportation (accompanied by Stantec Consulting Services and Fairpointe Planning as consultants), a comprehensive study titled *Summer Avenue Complete Streets Study* was published after four phases occurring in 2021. These phases included Phase 1: Visioning, Phase 2: Investigation, Phase 3: Concept Design and Phase 4: Reporting and Adoption. True to form-based design principles that prioritize an interdisciplinary and community driven approach to urban design, the efforts echo the values previously expressed in literature reviews. There are five guiding principles listed in the study, including: “redesign to accommodate a more complete street” that is more accessible for non-motorists such as pedestrians and cyclists, design safety features to infrastructure, traffic calming (such as medians, urban landscaping, intersections), quality urban design for placemaking (for residential structures and commercial buildings alike), and to “create a community gateway with attractive streetscape design while integrating cultural qualities” (City of Memphis Comprehensive Planning Department, et. al 35-36). As noted in literature reviews, signage falls within that final category of creating a sense of cultural place, identity, and aesthetic evaluation of an urban environment. The Memphis 3.0 initiative recognizes this part of the plan demands a “need to incorporate cultural character of the surrounding community into the branding and placemaking of the corridor – to tell the story of the community it serves” (City of Memphis Comprehensive Planning Department, et. al 36). Additionally, this portion of their guiding principles calls for “creating an aesthetic environment and enhanced beautification using improved streetscaping details, repair/maintenance, and community branding is vital to this
objective” (City of Memphis Comprehensive Planning Department, et. al 36). Much like form-based codes, this places critical importance on community feedback and observations.

The need for addressing signage as listed in this plan touches upon factors that contribute to visual pollution. The comprehensive study briefly notes that a call for removal of unnecessary signage much like the signage seen in Figure 12 below. With the removal of signage blight, the plan introduces the importance of activating building frontages that boost visual interest and walkability through the specific mention of creative signage.

![Figure 12. Unnecessary signage on Summer Avenue.](image)

As previously covered, signage takes on an important role in establishing a memorable sense of urban places. The Memphis 3.0 study calls for the preservation of community assets such as local businesses, churches, schools, and parks as touchpoints for maintaining a unique balance of placemaking. It also calls for fostering a shared sense of community identity that “represent the values of their residents and reflect the unique historical, cultural, economic and geographical context of the area” (City of Memphis Comprehensive Planning Department, et. al 49). Aside from the mention of removing unnecessary signage and promoting visually interesting frontages, there is not a specific in-depth section for commercial and residential signage.
initiatives. However, there is mention of seeking out “potential regulatory changes, whether through ordinance revisions, design standards development, or policy modifications” which includes a recommendation to “review signage provisions within the Memphis and Shelby County Unified Development code” (City of Memphis Comprehensive Planning Department, et. al 76). As shown in Figure 13, the Memphis 3.0 redesign plan seeks to foster memorable placemaking through public art, urban landscaping, and improved business frontage aesthetics. True to the goals and principles of form-based code, the Memphis 3.0 efforts utilize a form-based approach to developing urban areas.

Figure 13. Memphis 3.0 Summer Avenue frontage redesign. Courtesy of the Summer Avenue Complete Streets Survey. ” City of Memphis Comprehensive Planning Department, Division of Planning & Development and Tennessee Department of Transportation. 2022.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Form-based Sign Codes – Basic Principles

Prior to the shift in focus toward *form-based codes* in communities, *conventional zoning* (otherwise known as Euclidean zoning) was considered the standard to “protect the health and welfare of residents by setting clear boundaries between residential areas and industry to lower negative impacts on housing quality” (Pat Crawford et al. 200) with a distinct focus on land-use specification and regulations that are broad-scope and one-size-fits all. This type of zoning has been under critical fire for its disservice to communities by its “lack of design consideration, inefficient land use and serious social segregation since the 1960s” (P. Crawford et al. 200). In the 1980s, this began to change in favor of developing urban areas with more than land-use in mind; instead, it began to focus more on the physical, functional, community-based, and general vision or aesthetic of these areas. As a result, the Form-based Codes Institute developed a framework for this approach, defining it as: “A land development regulation that fosters predictable built results and a high-quality public realm by using physical form (rather than separation of uses) as the organizing principle for the code” (The Form-Based Codes Institute, *Form-Based Codes Defined*). It is important to note that the founders of this development strategy stress that this method is *not* simply a series of design guidelines or suggestions, but a set of visual and verbal *regulations* that are developed and upheld by codification in ordinances. The Form-Based Codes Institute (FBCI) lists five primary elements that go into managing such a development plan, including plans for regulation, public and building standards, administration organizations, and clear definitions of the forms and functions of the codes. A regulation plan is a visual mapping that marks the locations for varying types of building forms and associated standards within the area (for example, commercial storefronts versus commercial/residential
mixed-use buildings—similar, but different). Public standards include any features such as
sidewalks, bike lanes, benches and other furniture, and streetside parking that are oriented around
public use. Building standards provide regulations for building forms; their shape, layout,
aesthetic features and functions that shape the streetscapes and urban form. Administration
involves creating an organization or regulatory process to review applications and ensure the
community vision and codes are upheld. Definitions are simply that: form-based should include
explanations of technical terms as they relate to the codes written, and visual samples are
important to link the written codes to their meanings with photos and illustrations that help
promote better interpretations of the regulations ((The Form-Based Codes Institute, *Form-Based
Codes Defined*).). The FBCI also lists five optional elements: *architectural standards,*
*landscaping standards, environment resource standards, signage standards,* and *annotation.*
Specific to my research, *signage standards* involve “regulations controlling allowable signage
sizes, materials, illumination, and placement” ((The Form-Based Codes Institute, *Form-Based
Codes Defined*).).

When a community is newly developed or a pre-existing one undergoing re-development,
form-based codes have been shown to embrace the big-picture vision for a city that includes
community input for creating said vision, then provides city planners and developers with a
framework and set of tools for putting that vision into an actionable plan for making it a reality
(P. Crawford et al. 201). Signage falls within the public realm of communities, and therefore has
become an essential part of visually developing the perceived nature of a place (effectively
acting as a placemaking identity tool in giving a personality, function, and form to a location that
properly represents the community and business stakeholders alike). This approach to land
development is an interdisciplinary approach that seeks to better serve community needs and
experiences. In a comparative study of traditional zoning versus form-based codes, research states that “a form-based code system allows for creating a signage system that is focused on the “form” of the sign and its perceived aesthetic qualities” whereas traditional (or conventional) zoning focuses on the functionality of a sign (P. Crawford et al 212). The study showed that form-based codes closely inspect a community’s needs and seek to satisfy overall user experiences for both functional and perceived experiences and that developing individualized community feedback for the greater vision for a city’s perceived urban aesthetics, sense of place and memory of place (placemaking) (P. Crawford et al. 212).

The Form-Based Codes Institute offers a program called Smart Growth America to help inform and assist the adoption of form-based code systems in communities, providing education and training for city planners, stakeholders, communities, and industry leaders. The mission of this program is to assist in zone reformation and guidance on building out form-based codes to fit community needs. The process involves four components: code review, code audit, code adjustments, and ultimately provides a citywide strategy and compilation of new form-based codes. Code reviews examine existing codes for issues that impede a community’s growth and ability to reach their full aesthetic and functional potential, providing comments and suggestions for peer reviews of new form-based code suggestions. Code audits then focus on the parts of the community that have been identified as pain points for growth and development. At this point, the FBCI will interview “key stakeholders—city staff, elected officials, developers, property owners, and architects—to discover their concerns about the existing code and suggestions for improvements” (Form Based-Codes Institute, FBCI Codes for Communities). The auditing phase ends with a report that summarizes the findings from community interviews and will provide analysis-driven suggestions for code revision. The code adjustment phase is typically a four-step
process: review ordinance and land use/zoning policy to identify problems that may impede
process and note any inconsistencies in the code, conduct community surveys, provide proposals
for ordinance modifications, and create a presentation and report that includes their findings and
suggestions for community planners and stakeholders to review (Form Based-Codes Institute,
FBCI Codes for Communities).

Legal Aspects of Sign Ordinances After Reed v. Town of Gilbert

The legal aspect of signage regulation in America has significantly changed since 2015 with the Supreme Court’s decision in June of 2015 with its ruling on the Reed v. Town of Gilbert case in the state of Arizona. A church was cited a violation of local sign ordinance for exceeding the time limits set upon temporary content-based signage with specific messaging geared toward politics, events, or other non-commercial intent. Such an act would be exempt, in most cases, from obtaining a legal permit for their display for so long as they abide by the temporary, time-based allowance for public displays. The church had a “temporary” sign with time and place details of its weekly services on display more than the allowed time limit listed within the ordinance, which triggered the violation and subsequent citation. The church argued that it was singled out, citing that schools and other weekly hosted events were not under similar scrutiny. This was in part because the sign ordinance categorized temporary signage as either ideological, political, or directional temporary signage, the latter being the violation because the church included time & place information for the events (which were located off-premises at times). As a result, the Court ruled that the sign ordinance was in violation of the First Amendment and deemed content-based regulation. A content-based sign is one that bears a specific message, and in this case the sign ordinance was deemed to be a regulatory effort against signage such a message (Virginia Municipal League). The Virginia Municipal League helps to clarify the
distinction between content-based and content-neutral sign ordinances in the wake of the ruling:

There is an important distinction between “content-based” and “content-neutral”

laws. Content-based laws face strict scrutiny under the law [post Reed v. Town of

Gilbert] while content-neutral laws are subject to lesser scrutiny. Local ordinances

should reflect a content-neutral approach to signs. In Reed, the Court listed several

content-neutral options for regulating signage, including: “size, building materials,

lighting, moving parts, and portability (Virginia Municipal League).

Weinstein’s studies on the matter of Reed suggest, “Reed failed to provide an answer to

how we provide for the public’s desire for more signage during election campaigns in a wholly

content-neutral manner” (Weinstein, Sign Research Foundation 2016 Analysis 2). To summarize

this, that would mean that any sign code bearing content-based restrictions would be tightly

observed under a legal lens to ensure no free-speech rights are being suppressed by sign codes.

As a result, any sign code may be up for debate if the messaging of a sign (whether it be off-

premises such as yard signs or billboards, or on-premises such as building signs) is considered

“content-based” and therefore warranting, as Reed would suggest, protection under the First

Amendment. A content-based sign would be considered a sign that offers a “speaker-based”

message, much like signs made for elections posted in yards, on billboards, and other public

places (Weinstein, Sign Research Foundation 2016 Analysis 2). This, in sign codes across the

country, would typically fall under the categorization of temporary signage, but very well can

apply to on-premises and permanent signage.
It is important to note the changes that have come in the wake of *Reed v. Town of Gilbert* because it opens the discussion of how far a government can go to prescribe regulations on signage for the sake of freedom of speech or individual expression. After *Reed*, lower federal courts had to address the fallout and work to clarify the gaps in the ruling’s clarity. Since the ruling, the lower courts “ruled unanimously that *Reed* should not be applied to regulations that affect commercial signs,” but the challenge to sign code ordinances going under legal scrutiny still presents itself to date (Weinstein, *Sign Research Foundation 2016 Analysis* 2).

As Weinstein mentions in previous studies, there are several factors that go into developing effectively drafting sign code (even before increased scrutiny after *Reed*), and states “the local government’s adopted regulations should reflect a balance between the community’s desire to achieve certain regulatory objectives and the community’s tolerance for legal risk” (Weinstein, *Legal Considerations* 4). With the increasing pressures of more legal and research-driven scrutiny, industry leaders are cautioning municipalities to revisit their local sign ordinances with care as to ensure they are adaptable to court rulings.

Industry leaders such as the International Sign Association (ISA) have stepped in to provide guidance for governments to revise their sign codes. Dr. Dawn Jourdan cautions governments to be careful when drafting new sign codes and states, “The courts are divided as to the legality of sign regulations that are primarily grounded in aesthetics” and that “the high court has also recognized the value of commercial speech” (Jourdan, *Community Aesthetics* 6). Jourdan then goes on to explain this means “future courts are likely to render decisions that are sympathetic to the needs of businesses to advertise their goods in the open market, so long as those signs do not interfere with the free flow of passerby” (Jourdan, *Community Aesthetics* 6).
Redeveloping Sign Codes

In 2017, Dr. Dawn Jourdan, Dr. Eric Strauss, and Madeline Hunter released a study to survey seventeen out of thirty communities in the United States inquiring local governments, community members, and stakeholders’ various questions about the state of their local sign codes. Surprisingly enough, they reported that communities across the United States had not performed an overhaul of their sign code in the last 20 years, citing that minor revisions to sign code were the more popular route due to time and cost efficiency over proposing new zoning and code ordinances altogether (Jourdan et al. 44). The study showed that minor revisions took roughly four to six months and major overhauls taking nine to twelve months or up to two years to complete. Their findings also indicated that any amendments, minor or major, to sign code rarely had a significant amount of public involvement throughout the process, leaving the decision making largely up to stakeholders and government officials (Jourdan et al. 51). Within the same study, city planners were asked what organizations were the driving factor in propelling these changes forward, and the results were as follows:

The process for modifying the sign code was commonly initiated by someone within the city. This was typically a combination of requests from city council or administration and planning staff. Planners in Tallahassee, Florida explained that the sign industry played a role in beginning the process. The frequency of variances was a typical driver of internal decisions to revise sign codes. (Jourdan et al. 47).

*Variances* are special permit proposals submitted by a business asking to be granted signage that deviates from the existing sign code—may it be size, shape, color, type, placement, so on and so forth. As mentioned above, if enough businesses are willing to pay more money for the more
expensive permit application process, there is an indication that certain design needs are not being met (example: as cities grow in population/traffic/building density as well as advancements in signage technology). As for leading the actual process of modifying a sign code, studies determined that while city planners played the biggest role in driving the process forward, they sometimes need to bring in consultants on the matter due to lack of experience in the field, staffing shortages and subsequent lack of time for taking on the task (Jourdan et al. 48). As part of my research, I will investigate existing sign codes occurring in Memphis, Tennessee with these processes in mind should there be indicators that Memphis falls within the category of a city that could potentially be due for an overhaul of its sign ordinance.
CHAPTER THREE: Methods

Methods Used to Conduct Observational Studies

I relied on my ten years of experience working within the sign industry at a locally owned sign company in Memphis to inform some of the problem areas I have consistently witnessed first-hand throughout the city. I have prior knowledge of signage fabrication types, materials, and installation methods that informed the observational and design solutions provided in this study. Through the sign company affiliation, I was also able to access the most up-to-date sign code records for the Memphis and Shelby County Sign through Develop 901, which is part of the Memphis and Shelby County Division of Planning and Development’s resource for Land Use and Development Services online. I was also able to peer review my findings with the permitting manager of the local sign company (who has been working with sign code and permitting locally for 25 years) to verify that I was perceiving sign codes and sign-related city organizations to my best ability. My initial research into sign code documents led me to the district organizations such as the CBID, DMC, DRB, UDO, UNDC, and Memphis 3.0 to review their websites and their planning-related documents that relate to the management and development of public spaces throughout the city.

For the purposes of this research, I will only be focusing on Memphis, but it is important to note that adjacent cities seen in the map previously mentioned in Figure 1 such as Bartlett, Lakeland, Arlington, Germantown, and Collierville all have their own infrastructure and sign codes for their own jurisdictions while still abiding by the laws of Shelby County.

The final methods used to conduct this study are unobtrusive and observational in nature, requiring additional document and literature review of local sign code and photographic documentation of signage occurring under guidance of the city’s most current sign ordinance.
The goal is to investigate the basic functions of the sign ordinance set in place for Shelby County, Memphis, the Central Business Improvement District (CBID), and University District Overlay (UDO). The latter two districts have their own sign codes for the zones they encompass within the city of Memphis and Shelby County.

To conduct these observations, I made multiple trips to locations on Summer Avenue, Poplar Avenue, Highland Street, Madison, Cleveland/Crosstown Concourse, and Lamar Avenue in Memphis. Initially, I traveled alone to document signage located on Summer Avenue (approximately three visits) to document the general qualities of architecture, streetscapes, and signage throughout the area and make note of specific problem areas. I initially took note of the signage located at the French Village Square shopping center (see Figure 14), recognizing that the first impression of the tenant signage was mismatched in fabrication types and installation placements, generally sensing that the tenant spaces were overcrowded and less regulated in comparison to adjacent shopping centers. A nearby shopping center located at Grahamwood Crossing showed signs of new development during my first visit in the fall of 2022. In the spring of 2023, I returned to the area and documented the new signage that had been installed since my previous visit, which indicated a revitalization of commercial development and seemed to include a more mindful, cohesive approach to signage type, scale, and placement on the newly renovated building (see Figure 15 and Figure 16).
Figure 14. French Village Square tenant and monument signage.

Figure 15. Grahamwood Crossing tenant signage.
Taking note of the evolving nature of signage occurring on Summer Avenue, I decided it would be beneficial to compare these design choices to existing sign codes in Memphis and Shelby County to see if these aesthetics were derivative of law or property management, focusing on the public documents available for consideration. This did not allow for one-on-one conversations with tenants, landlords, or other stakeholders to determine if there were private documents that dictate tenant-landlord sign contracts and regulations. Instead, the focus was set on reviewing the sign codes that exist as they are upheld for all entities under the Shelby County jurisdiction. It is unclear if form-based code principles were used to develop the signage section of the code, so part of the methods included in this study involve observing Memphis and Shelby County sign codes (as well as districts within it with their own sign codes) in relation to how it affects local signage.

I then used a combination of Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop as well as CorelDRAW to furnish renderings of the proposed signage. Taking photos I obtained in the field, I photo-
manipulated the images to remove the signage for The French Village shopping center. I then traced the basic structure of the façade for a technical view of the layout. I then designed two sets of design proposals: both offering internally illuminated cabinet signs for structural uniformity. Cabinet signs (also known as box signs) are fabricated with a painted aluminum backside and sides, acrylic plastic faces, vinyl adhesive for business names, LED illumination on the interior with associated power supplies, and a painted aluminum retainer which is a lip that is bolted around the sign’s face to keep the acrylic in place. The reason behind this was to provide a simple, straightforward, cost-efficient solution to the design problem that would, from personal experience of selling signs, fit most illuminated sign budgets.

The importance of researching these sign codes is to help give some context to the legal grounds upon which signs are conceptualized, manufactured, installed, and ultimately maintained within communities. The sign code for CBID and UDO encompass a small fraction of the zones that are covered by Memphis signage regulation, but offer potential insights as to how a more form-based or aesthetically mindful sign code can help bring visual harmony and reduce visual pollution. By breaking down some key weak points in existing sign codes and showing corresponding photographs of related signage, I will ideally take a step forward in addressing sign code needs for businesses and communities alike.
Chapter Four: Results

Comparative Analysis of Existing Sign Codes & Key Takeaways

When comparing the Memphis and Shelby County sign code to that of CBID and UDO districts within the city, it becomes clear that there are a few distinctions that set them apart that could impact the quality of signage in their zones. The Central Business Improvement District benefits from the oversight of the Memphis Landmarks Commission and Downtown Memphis Commission and subsequent Design Review Board. Such oversight is not meant to restrict the expression of individualistic characteristics that define businesses, but instead provide overall reasoning and guidance on sign design as it relates to the larger community vision and preservation of the downtown Memphis experience. This guidance and regulation help to prevent visual pollution by providing clear limitations, helpful explanations/visual references—all of which undergo technical and aesthetic review by board members. The CBID is by far the most regulated of all districts within the city of Memphis, yet still manages to allow for unique new signage and reasonable preservation of historic signage that remains in place. It serves as a great example of how sign regulation can occur for existing urban infrastructure as well as newly developed areas that expand the downtown aesthetic and experience beyond the historic structures already in place. It is a hybrid of old and new development, and the signage code for the area is comprehensive and robust to protect and cultivate a positive urban experience for citizens, visitors, businesses, and potential investors alike.

Within the CBID’s Downtown Design Guide and Principles, it is important to note that, while there is a lot of verbiage that reinforces the design regulations—there are also photographic visuals provided to readers that help to make sense of sign types, illumination types, installation expectations, color selections, and accent features that represent the local
character. This pairing of visual and verbal examples and explanations do what the UDC ordinances do not: they help reinforce interpretations of sign codes and the purposes behind them. While the design guide provided by the DRC for the district includes these materials for business owners and industry leaders to review, similar visual material is not seen in the code of ordinances (therefore, the DRC is responsible for providing access to this knowledge, making it more difficult to be readily accessible by the general public).

The University District Overlay and Highland Strip area is another example of a unified sign code set into place in a redeveloped area. In conjunction with form-based approaches that look to synchronize architecture, streetscapes, transit, and signage—the updated code for the district provides businesses, landlords, and the sign industry with the tools needed to design and install appropriate signage that reflects the new vision and experiences intended for these public places. Much like the CBID, the UDO offers an in-depth explanation of a distinct purpose, aesthetic goals for the districts, and specific regulations that prevent signage from becoming a visual burden on these spaces. The UDO does not have a design review board like that of the CBID, but rather seems to rely on business owners, sign companies, landlords or property managers to uphold the vision set in place by the UDO guidelines set in place before they go for permit review with the city. Signs erected in the zone must abide by the technical regulations as they are stipulated by the UDO code, but the final aesthetics would depend on the mindful design, review, and approval of private interests over that of a formal committee review. The UDO sign guidelines do provide illustrations that cover architectural features but does not include images or drawings of signage to help visualize how they interact with the urban streetscape, store frontage, and adjacent businesses.
As for Memphis and Shelby County sign code, which still operates largely under conventional zoning and land use categorization—there seems to be room for improvements within the sign code. While minor revisions or amendments to the sign code could be considered for modification, the number of redevelopment efforts that seem to acknowledge the need for signage reform within the redeveloped area indicates that a larger, community-wide issue at hand may need to be addressed. It is my recommendation that signage regulation be brought to the forefront of observation and given the same level of care and treatment that other urban environment focus areas are given (streetscapes, building and frontage improvements, traffic calming, transit improvements and the like previously discussed).

Efforts such as the Memphis 3.0 community redevelopment initiatives seek to provide effective solutions to redeveloping urban areas to better serve present-day community needs. These comprehensive plans incorporate the input of stakeholders, communities, designers, city planners to produce an in-depth assessment of the community’s unique identities, needs, and existing conditions that require focused attention for meaningful change. The proposals for infrastructure modifications (including architectural, traffic calming, safety, transportation) are robust, but the importance of signage and sign code falls short of receiving much attention in the plan. When reviewing existing sign codes and regulations, it appears as though creating ordinance amendments with district overlays with customized signage regulation seems to be the current solution to the design problem at hand.

As noted by the Signage Research Foundation, the average sign code has not been updated with major overhauls in the last 20 years, and Memphis/Shelby County is nearing that category with its last overhaul occurring in 2010. As reflected in studies, an abundance of variance requests for signage or amendments to district-assigned sign codes are common factors
in driving major revisions to a sign code overhaul. An observational, photographic study of the existing state of signage compared to sign code throughout the city of Memphis indicates that, unless a district is managed by an advisory committee or review commission that has invested in studying the community and urban environment (such as CBID, UDO, and Memphis 3.0 efforts), then the state of signage reflects the quality control and understanding of sign codes on behalf of private parties (landlords, tenants, designers and manufacturers operating in the sign industry). Investigation of sign code and zoning ordinances suggest that Memphis and Shelby County still operate primarily under conventional zoning over form-based code methodologies (with exception of CBID, UDO, or self-imposed design guidelines on behalf of private parties). The existing sign code does illustrate setbacks, height limits, and methods for calculating square footage for sign size, but lacks comprehensive illustrations or supportive signage imagery to help the public better understand sign types as they relate to sign code.

Existing sign codes for Memphis are broad-scope in nature (more reflective of conventional zoning over form-based approaches) and lack in-depth visualizations of signage. Jourdan et al. point out that, “just as a passerby needs to see a sign to navigate the urban landscape, so too, a person reading a code benefit from a photograph or drawing example of what is permissible and what is not” (Jourdan et al. Sign Code Development Process 6). Review of the Memphis and Shelby County Unified Development Code reveals very limited illustrative images and no photography for the section on signage, indicating that there is room for more study and examination into bringing form-based approaches to Memphis as it relates specifically to signage.

My observations of the city-wide sign code suggest the current decision-making process relies on the government officials, business owners, landlords, and sign companies (with
exception of communities benefiting from support such as Memphis 3.0). Community engagement and input through form-based code development procedures can be brought in to alleviate the gap between codes and communities because their interviews and feedback would inform redevelopment of sign codes on the front end. Without revisions with specific design requirements made to the sign code, signage in most of the city are currently upheld by requirements on size/square footage allotments (which vary based on zoning, e.g., office districts are limited to 35sqft for signs whereas commercial zones are not limited), setbacks from structures or streets, total number of signs, and illumination type.

Upon comparison of the sign code as it exists in the most recent Unified Development Code (UDC), I also want to note that there are only a few illustrations to visually represent code language and are very minimal in aesthetic and technical quality (see Figure 17 and Figure 18). The same applies to the sign codes for CBID and UDO districts, signifying that there may be room for further improvement in how information is relayed visually. Both the CBID and UDO provide comprehensive form-based illustrations for architecture and streetscape forms and functions, which are true to FBIC principles, but lack the same features for signage codes.

After compiling a series of 300 images that document the current state of signage around the city, I also want to note that many of the most visually problematic areas currently lie within multi-tenant shopping centers as well as abandoned signage that has fallen into disrepair after a business has vacated a property. Since visual pollution and blight are a topic of this discussion, I want to also note that the Shelby County code orders sign maintenance as follows:

The sign owner shall be liable to maintain such sign, including its illumination sources, in neat and orderly condition and good working order at all times and to prevent the development of any deterioration in the safety of such sign. Nothing in this chapter shall prohibit the routine maintenance of any nonconforming sign or the changing of the copy or content of any nonconforming sign, except where such maintenance or change in copy would increase the degree of its nonconformity (“The Memphis and Shelby County Unified Development Code” 221).

Beyond this order to maintain signage in an orderly function, there is no mention of signage removal if a business should close or relocate. I make note of this because I have witnessed firsthand working in the Memphis sign industry what typically occurs with pre-existing signage.
There is a tendency to want to re-use old sign frames, poles, etc. to save on cost—and, while there is not inherently an issue with accommodating those needs for so long as the sign has been brought back to safe working order, it does seem to result in abandoned signs on lots such as Figure 19 and Figure 20 below (in my observational experience this typically applies to pole signs, which are free-standing signs located nearer to the street). Abandoned signs like this are subject to damage from weather, aging, general disrepair, lack of regular maintenance or code enforcement until said sign is repurposed. As they fall into disrepair or clear abandonment, they tend to accompany other forms of blight (Figure 21). In the event that a sign is repurposed (should it not be deemed non-conforming by codes), sometimes the new graphics do not fit the old framework as well as they would if it were to be custom tailored to their own design needs anyway. This can also contribute to visual disharmony and damage the perception of an environment as previously mentioned in the literature review.

**Figure 19.** Sign in disrepair on Summer Avenue.
Observations and Redesign of The French Village Square

Figure 22 shows a wide-angle view of The French Village shopping center located on Summer Avenue, which consists of eleven tenants varying from commercial services to retail and restaurants. In Figure 26 listed below, I have included the initial observations of The French Village shopping center on Summer Avenue in Memphis, TN. This area falls within a mixed-use commercial zone within Memphis & Shelby County, and according to existing sign code size and placement are not formally regulated. Signs are allowed to mount to the roof, and there are no requirements on manufacture styles or square footage of the signage. This would suggest that the signage type, style, size, and placements are left up to the landlord/property managers, tenants, and sign companies serving the clients. There are no requirements or suggestions that signage should harmonize with each other and their surrounding architectural or environmental qualities. Figure 23 showcases the multi-tenant monument sign centered in the parking lot and
Figure 24 shows the Palmer restaurant street sign existing on the west end of the parking lot. Figure 25 shows the Dollar General street sign located at the east end of the parking lot. Of all the signs existing on the property, the multi-tenant sign is the only one that attempts to visually tie into the architecture of the building in its design (albeit dated by time, it showcases an effort of unifying design). Without inspection from electricians and city code enforcement, I cannot weigh in on the structural integrity of the signage located in the parking lot or attached to the building facades, but from the naked eye and general observations—there are some signs that lead me to question it for further investigation.

Figure 22. Wide view of The French Village shopping center.
Figure 23. The French Village multi-tenant sign.
Figure 24. Palmer street sign.

Figure 25. Dollar General street sign.
After making my observations in Figure 26 and comparing the shopping center signage to other retail centers throughout Memphis, I began to take note of consistencies (or lack thereof). For example, the Poplar Commons shopping center in East Memphis shown in Figure 27 falls within the same kind of mixed-use commercial district as The French Village. While it is important to note that these two locations within the city may benefit or suffer from different socioeconomic support systems and are most certainly built at different times (therefore one will inevitably show its age in structure and aesthetic), so my primary focus is not to highlight that one series of tenants is newer or can afford to purchase and install higher quality signage. The type of businesses also differs; largely seen are corporate brands and larger companies than seen in The French Village. I primarily want to note certain form-based consistencies as they are seen in Figure 27 and Figure 28. The monument sign in Figure 27 echoes the aesthetics, color palette, and material of the buildings that are located within the shopping center, bringing unity to the general design. Figure 27 also shows that the signage is reasonably proportional to the clearly defined “signable” area located on the building façade for Chicken Salad Chick, not extending out of the assigned bounding box. There is also variety in typography and color within the signage and allows for any combination mark (either logotype, which is typographic-centered or including a logomark or pictorial element to create a combination mark within the wall signage) as seen in Figure 28. The signage is consistent in form and function. There is unity in how they are manufactured, what materials are used, their sensitivity to the urban forms around them, and are generally installed in a uniform and predictable fashion that assists in wayfinding. Since the general proportions and installation locations are centered and orderly, this allows for more visual harmony, ease in visual information consumption, and visual balance while still fostering design diversity.
Figure 26. The French Village initial observations.

Existing signage: Installation notes
SIGN 1: La Mihocana (dining), installed on roof
SIGN 2: Smoker Friendly (retail), installed on roof
SIGN 3: Palmar (restaurant); installed on roof and facade trim
SIGN 4: El Corral (retail); installed on roof
SIGN 5: Rapid Refund Taxes (commercial services), installed on facade trim
SIGN 6: All Star Hot Wings (restaurant), installed with sign flush to bottom of canopy trim
SIGN 7: Glamour Salon (commercial services), installed centered on canopy trim
SIGN 8: The French Village (wayfinding/shopping center sign), installed under canopy
SIGN 9: The Cottage (restaurant), installed with sign flush to bottom of canopy trim
SIGN 10: Magic Wireless (commercial services), installed centered on canopy trim
SIGN 11: Perfecto Staffing (commercial services), installed centered on canopy trim
SIGN 12: Dollar General (retail), installed on roof

Additional observations:
- Multi-tenant Shopping center (11 visible from street)
- Mixed-use commercial
- Inconsistent installation & placements on facade
- Inconsistent signage (business names, phone numbers, sign types)
- No sign code violations to the visible eye in basic form or function; operational inspection would be required for installation & functional safety

SIGN TYPES:
1 Face-lit channel letters on a raceway.
2 Face-lit channel shape/logo badge.
3 Rectilinear cabinet sign or tag line.
4 Live edge cabinet sign.
By providing a before/after redesign of a multi-tenant shopping center located on Summer Avenue, I sought to take some observations from Poplar Commons shopping center and provide a relatively conservative solution for The French Village Square. By observing the consistencies of scale, placement, and material types for more orderly shopping center designs elsewhere in the city, I developed a series of cabinet signs for The French Village Shopping Center as seen in Figures 29-30 while taking into account that the solution should also consider economic values of signage. A cabinet sign is less expensive for manufacture and maintenance, consisting of an aluminum welded box on five sides and a white acrylic sheet on the front facing
side (which then has black vinyl adhesive overlaid to display the business name). A sign like this could be more cost efficient for lower-income areas, allowing for future tenants to only replace the surface vinyl provided that the acrylic has not suffered from excessive sun fading or other weathering. I chose to do this because I wanted to provide an option that would provide consistency and legibility while respecting a financial middle ground for tenants. Focusing solely upon modifying the signage and not the architecture, I have showcased the importance that sign placement and type can begin to create a sense of order and harmony.

Figures 29 and 30 both honor similar typefaces as the original signs, but omit pictorial graphics from the layouts to minimize visual noise. In Figures 29-32, the West side of the building offers variable scales in the size of the box signs (to mimic the scale they are at present) whereas the East side cabinet sizes are more uniform and made to fit over each tenant frontage (resulting in two different sizes due to the left and rightmost tenants having smaller frontage. Figures 31 and 32 offer a more uniform configuration of typefaces to make better use of the space available on each sign and to provide another tier of uniformity for the signage. All of the sign renderings are done in black and white to maximize contrast and visibility since there are varying frontage setbacks. The purpose of these drawings is to showcase potential options for uniform sign design systems and serve as initial concepts for community members to begin a discussion on balancing aesthetics of signage with form, function, and economic value in mind.

Additionally, the diagrams of signage help to show the importance of scale, sign type, and organizational patterns when there are multiple tenants in a shopping center. I do want to note that, just like redeveloping streetscapes and architecture benefit from redeveloping sign regulation; the same goes for signage benefiting from streetscape and architectural improvements. The illustrations show that for quality urban aesthetics to truly be successful—
each factor of design (architecture, landscaping, streetscapes, public transportation, and safety infrastructure) should be done in tandem with each other to yield the best results, and that includes signage. Offering the shopping center more uniformity in sign type, color palette, and consistent scaling and placement begins to showcase how any façade, old or new, could stand to benefit from more uniform regulation in sign type and structures for multi-tenant buildings.

Figure 29. Rework of West side of French Village Square with variable typography.
Figure 30. Rework of East side of French Village Square with variable typography.
Figure 31. Rework of West side of French Village Square with uniform typography.
Figure 32. Rework of East side of French Village Square with uniform typography.
Chapter Five: Discussion

Proposal for Sign Code Revisions and Considerations

The fundamental principles of form-based code and land redevelopment actively underway in Memphis (as seen in the ongoing efforts of Memphis 3.0), but the primary focus does not highlight the importance of redefining the role of signage code in these areas as part of the mission. Signage is considered an optional aspect of the Form-Based Institute, so focus on buildings and transportation infrastructure appears to take precedence. While the Memphis/Shelby County Unified Code Development advocates that it is a hybrid code of both conventional zoning and form-based zoning, my observations of the sign code section seem to be more in line with the former (with exception for CBID and UDO sign codes). It is my recommendation that the Memphis-Shelby County Sign Code by further examined for a full overhaul that includes comprehensive illustrations and a design guide manual for form-based signage.

Study Limitations and Future Study

A limitation of this observational study includes the need to gather large samples of feedback from communities throughout Memphis as well as targeted interviews with developers, tenants and business owners, citizens, investors, visitors, government officials and industry leaders to get a broadened understanding of how signs and their respective codes in the area are perceived. Currently most documents on the subject within the city focus more on architecture, traffic, infrastructure, and less so on signage. Future research could take these observations, considerations, and recommendations and expand them into a comprehensive community survey. Furthermore, providing local communities and decision makers with this information could potentially help reduce visual pollution, promote future community involvement, and help build
more positive experiences in public environments. Existing sign codes of Memphis can be redeveloped with form-based sign design practices taken into consideration, which will improve visual harmony and order while still preserving unique characteristics of the places and businesses in the areas affected.

There is also a limitation to my observational studies; I cannot display these internal workings of each of the locations and their landlord/tenant relationships, but I predict that: without robust sign code regulations from the county or city, a shopping center can suffer from lack of informed guidance that will reduce contributions to visual pollution if a stakeholder is not very involved in the design review process. This can result in the business attention-grabbing sign wars mentioned in the literature review: I will often receive requests to make signage as big as possible—and while it may be legal for these zones under the current ordinance, studies previously mentioned that this approach is not always going to yield the intended results. If there is not much guidance or regulation on signage type and installation location as it is seen in Figure 33 and Figure 35, shopping centers may begin to have an overall mismatched series of structures, which has been proven to disrupt harmony and order when consumers are perceiving an environment.

**Figure 33.** Multi-tenant building with varied sign types.

Using Figure 34 and 35 as examples, I want to note how the disruption of a common horizontal centerline can affect the overall user experience of an urban environment and impede
wayfinding experiences. If not mandated to be within a specific percentage of the storefront overall frontage (as is the case in CBID and UDO districts), the final say in material, sizing, and placement is, in my observational experience, something that is left up to the discretion of landlords/property managers if they have an existing contractual agreement with their tenants to follow their own set of sign guidelines. Not having access to private documents of landlord-tenant contracts and agreements limits my ability to weigh in fully on this part of the design problem. From my experience working within the field, I know these documents do exist and that I have witnessed firsthand that some landlords are more involved in the design decision making process—there will still be a knowledge gap worth exploring. Such a study could expose the internal workings of shopping centers as they relate to general upkeep and regulation, perhaps yielding information that could help reform regulatory behaviors and improve the longevity of positive changes occurring in present day urban environments. This could take place in the form of long-term regulation plans that will protect the functional, aesthetic, and operational values set into place by these redevelopment efforts as they relate to exterior signs.

Figure 34. Signs with same manufacture type, varied horizontal centerlines.
Figure 35. More signs with varied manufacture types, varied horizontal centerlines.

**Study Strengths**

Previous studies state that sign codes have not had a major revision in an average of 20 years. My studies revealed that Memphis-Shelby County Unified Development Code was last revised in 2010, but much of the sign code in the writing has been carried over from previous iterations and continues to lack form-based principles in the sign code section. Looking into the sign codes and guidelines for the Central Business Improvement District and University Overlay District show a more refined application of sign code that reflects form-based principles, but are closely tailored to those specific districts and lack visual material within the sign code itself.

Identifying the strengths of the CBID and UDO refined codes can help inform future improvements of Memphis-Shelby County sign codes and provide a general framework for identifying best practices that could carry over into citywide signage needs. The information provided in this study points out the successful, form-based development efforts of the Memphis 3.0 initiatives, but also reveals that in-depth community-driven research into exterior signage design systems may be lacking in studies such as *Summer Avenue Complete Streets Study*.

The collection of 300 images of signs throughout the city help to provide a physical look into the current state of signage throughout the city and how existing sign codes have played out
in the built environment. These images can be used in community feedback sessions and for industry leaders, city planners, and researchers to compare and utilize in further analysis.

Conclusion

My observations of both existing code and signage suggest that the Memphis and Shelby County sign code may benefit from closer inspection and consideration for a sign code overhaul to better serve the interests of the city at large instead of relying on redevelopment initiatives and district overlays to enact positive change for the future. Future studies could expand and synthesize these observations with an in-depth, interdisciplinary look into redeveloping sign code with the guidance of the FBIC’s Form-Based Codes for Communities program. These studies could take this approach and connect with sign industry leaders, researchers, city planners in efforts to rework sign codes. All of this could be done in tandem with citizen involvement and subsequent feedback that will be unique to the Memphis community. As the city grows and undergoes further development, addressing modern-day signage needs is a must to ensure positive community engagement and economic growth.
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