

# Lights out for neon signs

By Judy Keen  
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## Fans seek to save vintage art as fixtures are tossed, replaced

CHICAGO — The neon signs advertising “Sieglar Heaters” and “Martin Incinerators” on a Milwaukee Avenue appliance store are pretty beat up, and the metal that supports the glass tubes is rusted through in places.

To photographer Dan Zamudio, though, they are works of art. “They’re great, but they’ll probably be torn down soon,” he says.

Zamudio has a passion and concern for the neon signs that for decades have added sparkle and color to city streets. Landmarks Illinois last month put Chicago’s large-scale neon signs on its endangered watch list. They “are a testament to the art of the neon sign maker as well as to the spirit of their times,” the preservation group said.

Neon signs are being appreciated again. Museums in Los Angeles, Las Vegas and Cincinnati showcase neon. The National Park Service helped save some neon signs along historic Route 66.

Preservationists and residents helped rescue a huge 1947 neon bunny sign in Saginaw, Mich., and a 1938 Pepsi-Cola sign in New York City.

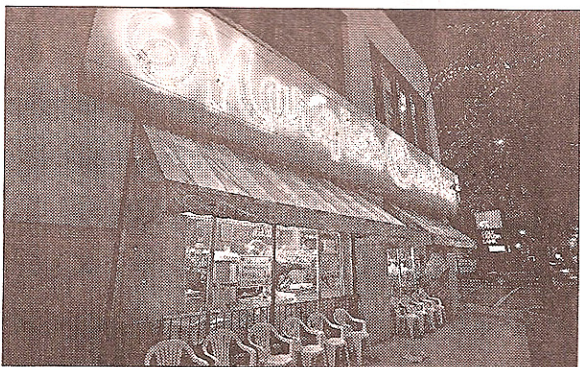
“When there’s a threat of a landmark sign coming down, there’s often a grass-roots movement to save it,” says Tod Swormstedt, founder of Cincinnati’s American Sign Museum. “When people think of retro, they think of the ‘50s. That means neon.”

### Neon fell out of favor in ‘60s

The first neon sign was sold to a Paris barber in 1912. By the 1920s, they were considered the most modern and stylish way to advertise. Light is produced when an electric current is sent through gas in a glass tube.

Neon fell out of favor in the 1960s and 1970s when urban renewal was a priority and zoning regulations often banned new neon signs. When businesses were sold or remodeled, their neon signs often were thrown away.

Neon signs are more fragile, harder to repair and use more electricity than LEDs, says Bob Clauss of Parvin-



**Chicago landmark:** The original Margie's Candies opened in 1921. Among its patrons: the Beatles and Al Capone.



**Artwork:** Dan Zamudio checks out neon along Milwaukee Avenue in Chicago. Behind him: the Logan cinema.

Clauss Sign Co. in Carol Stream, a Chicago suburb. Those factors often prompt businesses with old neon signs to replace them, he says. “Customers are looking for a good value, and they want to do what’s right for the environment,” Clauss says.

Zamudio documented his favorites in a book of photos, *Chicago Neon Signs: Downtown and Neighborhood Landmarks Through a Toy Camera*, out last week. “In 20 years, none of them are going to be around,” he says. “What’s lost is character, a sense of the neighborhood community and a piece of history.”

Chicago needs to move quickly to rescue its historic neon, says Jim Peters, president of Landmarks Illinois. A few signs are protected because they’re on landmark buildings, such as Wrigley Field and the Chicago Theatre. Others are at risk because businesses that own them moved or closed, including a “Z Frank” car dealership sign and a “Stars Motel” sign that now stands on a vacant lot, he says.

### Difficult to maintain

The Chevrolet dealership that owns the Z Frank sign relocated and decided not

to move it because it needs repairs, says owner Chuck Frank. “It breaks our heart,” he says. He’d like to donate the sign to a museum.

Peters would like to find a way to save and display the best neon signs. “It’s a very difficult preservation,” he says. “The signs are tied so much to the original use.”

Tim Samuelson, Chicago’s cultural historian, says he’d like to find a way to give owners incentives to save their signs. He sometimes urges store owners to keep their neon signs intact.

“I hope that as people realize that these signs are unique, they are works of art, and that they tell a story and are fast disappearing, people who own them will find it worthwhile ... to save them,” Samuelson says.

Kathy Salus won’t let anything happen to the neon sign her father, Roy Repole, designed in 1969 for his store, Rosario’s Italian Sausage. The sign shows a pig leaping into a meat grinder and emerging as sausage links. It’s encased in plexiglass to prevent vandalism, Salus says, and is “extremely difficult to maintain.”

Salus is considering retiring from the family business, but she wants the sign “to go on in some fashion, maybe in a museum.”

Tom Brickler, owner of The Neon Shop, makes new neon signs, rescues old ones and shares vintage signs with the makers of movies shot in Chicago.

“It’s getting harder to find old neon signs,” Brickler says. “I hope the new LED signs have reached the saturation point and we’ll go back to the neon.”