



Signs of a City:

How Baltimore City Imagery has
Helped Shape its Visual Culture

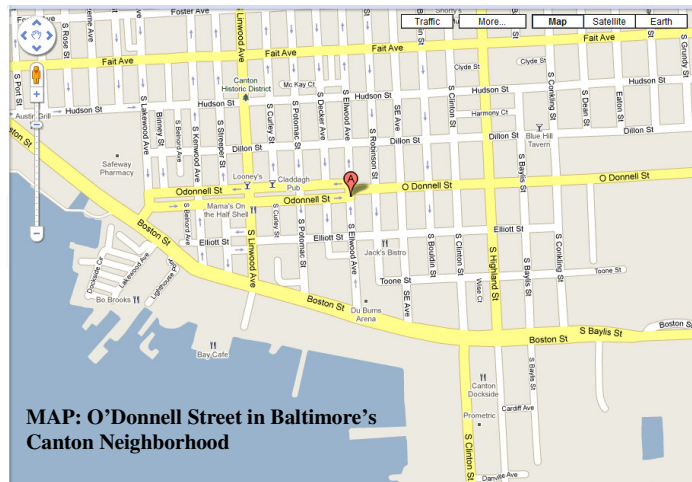
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The night had turned coal black when I pulled onto O'Donnell Street in south east Baltimore on a seemingly-uneventful night in mid April. My solitary twenty-minute journey from the city's suburban outskirts in Anne Arundel County had been decided on a whim and was fueled by a sudden desire to soak in Baltimore's current pictorial appeal and visual culture.



It's understandable why most would hastily avoid traveling deep into the city, especially after dark and completely alone. Baltimore, as of recent decades, has not exactly lived up to its "charming" moniker that alludes to an almost Disney-like ambiance. In 2009, Baltimore ranked #1 for highest number of homicides among the nation's cities that are populated by more than 500,000. To add insult to injury, the city's mayor was convicted of embezzlement and consequently resigned from office just two short months into 2010.

Crime. Corruption. Conviction. Even an embarrassingly bad baseball team (Oriole "fans" have been sighted wearing bags over their heads at Camden Yards). One must wonder: Is this really the Charm City that it once was?

Socially, many would agree that Baltimore City certainly is not as charismatic as it once boasted to be. Visually, however, I would argue that the "charm" is still profusely

alive and active. The city's magical skyline of world-famous sign structures promotes a timeless look and feel that tends to often be taken for granted. I, however, was on a mission to acknowledge Baltimore's landmark signage and understand them for what it's worth to the city.

While this visual journey may seem rather random and bazaar to most, it has progressively become a habitual routine in my life. Having been born into a family that owns and operates a fairly large, Baltimore-based sign design and manufacturing company, I like to believe that the art of this city is in my blood. My desire for this particular drive into the heart and soul of downtown Baltimore was propelled by the blazing neon structures, glowing pylon architecture and beamingly-bright billboards within Baltimore's south-side neighborhoods. I pushed the pedal to the medal and prepared my eyes for the visual feast of signage and culture that awaited me.

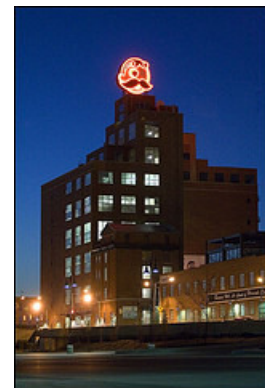
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Baltimore's Canton neighborhood seemed an ideal area to begin my journey. For starters, the community's Victorian-era architecture and rich culture combine for an eccentric style of its own. I knew the imagery would not be disappointing.

As O'Donnell Street stretched on, I found myself ensnared behind a purple taxicab. With no place to be and no time constraints, I took the rare opportunity to, well, stop and smell the roses.

While New York City may have the Statue of Liberty and Philadelphia may possess the great Liberty Bell, Baltimore City residents boast something they view as almost equally significant: The National Bohemian Tower.

Perched atop the 11 story-high building where National Bohemian beer was famously brewed until 1978 (it was bought out by Halethorpe, Maryland-based G. Heileman Brewing Company) is one of Baltimore's most recognizable and iconic figures. Yes, I'm referring to Mr. Boh.



The National Bohemian Tower

As I sat in my car watching Mr. Boh’s 28 foot-tall neon red face wink back at me, I began to think about how the sign has enriched Baltimore’s marketing endeavors in recent years. Since being installed in early 2006, the popularity of Mr. Boh has made a fanatical comeback within the city. The sign stimulated the opening of a slew of city bars and retailers such as The Natty Boh Lounge in Brewers Hill and the Natty Boh Gear shop in Fells Point.



The Natty Boh Lounge
On S. Conkling St.
in Brewer’s Hill

I also thought of the Smyth Jewelers billboard advertisement on North Charles Street which illustrates Mr. Boh down on one knee proposing to the Utz Potato- Chip girl. The campaign, which uses the catchy slogan “Where Baltimore Gets Engaged”, promotes itself as a Baltimore-based Jeweler through utilizing the old time, picturesque charm of Mr. Boh. Clever? Yes. Effective? Apparently so, as the billboard advertisement continues to stay up.

Before driving off, I took one last glance at the Mr. Boh sign and thought about how truly remarkable it is how one sign can spark such inspiration and excitement.



“Where Baltimore Gets Engaged” Smyth Jewelers Billboard on N. Charles St.



I continued down O’Donnell Street, driving just below the speed limit in an effort to capture any signs and structures that may have escaped my vision during previous visits.

As I approached the restaurant and retail area known as Canton Square, the only thought that saturated my mind was how there truly is no other single roadway in Baltimore that visually glorifies the city’s culture such as O’Donnell Street.

Where else in Baltimore can you find a Mexican Restaurant that illuminates its entrance with a sombrero-wearing, mustache-donning, one-eyed Mr. Boh? Nacho Mama’s attention-grabbing neon fixture proves itself as a complimentary art piece to this National Bohemian beer-worshipping neighborhood. Prior to my first visit inside of the restaurant and bar, the Nacho Mama’s neon sign had consistently piqued my curiosity as to what could be found inside the building. (“Balmer” décor galore, Sizzling fajitas, Mexican Crab Dip, and even margaritas served in hubcaps? Like their sign, this place is truly one of a kind.)



Nacho Mama’s
in Canton

Clearly, this was not just another neon “OPEN” sign. It was art. It was culture. It had personality. Ultimately, it was candy to my eyes and mind. And, like many others, I took the bait.

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Crossing over Boston Street, I knew the prime time views and aesthetics of the harbor from Canton Park would be dramatic. The first sign that stood out visually was, of course, the Domino Sugar sign. The Locust Point-based sugar plant spends approximately \$100,000 annually just on general maintenance for and powering up the basketball court-sized neon fixture (1).



The Domino
Sugar Plant in
Locust Point

In my opinion, the Domino Sugar sign is more than just a tremendously large, landmark sign. It serves as a symbol that Baltimore’s industrial plants are still a significant part of the local, regional and national economy. Even though Domino Sugar is a worldwide brand, it continues to operate and flourish out of Baltimore. The fact that the Domino Sugar sign, as old and antique-looking as it is, continues to stay up despite all the signage trends and technological advancements that the digital age has introduced is truly incredible.

In fact, The Domino Company would rather spend money on maintaining the current look of the sign rather than upgrading it to something more modern. This, I

thought, is undeniably a successful representation of how Baltimore visually keeps its culture alive and well.

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Whether or not people agree that Baltimore's status as a warm, welcoming and socially charming city is a thing of the past, I believe whole heartedly that the culturally-soaked imagery indeed reveals the unvarnished truth. Although the city may continue down the path of corrupted politicians, record-high crime statistics, and a pathetically shameful major league baseball team, there remains one aspect of Baltimore City that will carry on its legendary culture: Its signage.
