

STARTING FROM STREET SIGNS

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The North Gate of Taipei (Beimen) was hidden under a bridge for years. The Taipei West District Gateway Project made this historic site visible to all once again. Through the Beimen Street Sign Project, the surrounding area received an upgrade, revealing the street's original historic fabric, and transforming its street signs.

What was unique about this project was the level of community participation in the design process. Local consultant firm Vision Union used the topic of street signs as a starter to involve residents and businesses in discussing public space; the interface between public and individual life. A bottom-up approach was used to decide on a new streetscape and to create a new design method for the future management of the street and its advertising.

COMMERCIAL SIGNS DISTORTING HISTORIC BEIMEN STREET

In Taiwan, almost all urban areas are a mix of residential and commercial properties. Therefore, business activities exist in almost every block and street. Shop owners try their best to attract customers by using bright and flickering neon signs. This makes Taiwan's urban street landscape seem disorganised and adds to citizens' eye fatigue.



To solve this problem, Taipei City government published a series of sign-setting regulations in 1996. Beimen Camera Street was one of the areas that was subsidised by the government to renew all its commercial signs. However, it soon became apparent that there was a big gap in perception between what the government and the local residents thought commercial signs should look like. Regulations were poorly executed, and the street landscape failed to improve.

In 2016, as part of the Taipei West District Gateway Project, the Zhongxiao Bridge approach was dismantled. As a result, the North Gate of Taipei (Beimen), which had been hidden under the bridge for years, could finally be seen by citizens. It revealed the original urban landscape, connecting Beimen to other historic sites such as the Beimen Post Office, Mitsui House and the Qing Dynasty Arsenal.

Phase 1: reforming the image

Vision Union, a consulting firm dedicated to building up sustainable relationships between humans and the environment,

proposed a community-led process to transform the image of commercial signs in Beimen Street. The aim was to educate and empower the community to propose alternative designs and to set up a practical regulation for commercial signs that can improve the urban landscape.

- First, the firm built up a database of commercial signs, using site analysis, professional opinions and by studying similar cases from around the world.
- Second, they held several workshops and events in the local community, inviting designers and commercial sign makers to have conversations about subjects like scale, positioning, lighting, colour, font, and material.
- Third, they matched six designers with six different shops to redesign their signs.
- Finally, they held an exhibition to reveal the process and the results to the public.

Phase 2: finding common ground

Based on existing regulations and discussions with the designers and makers, Vision Union introduced concepts of active and passive control. Active control involves setting up restrictions and limitations, including sign position, scale, measurement, and lighting, while passive control chooses to avoid extreme situations and provide recommendations, including colour and fonts. The community decided on the passive control approach and proceeded with collective design discussions.

Phase 3: expanding the imagination

After the series of workshops, it was time to attract local shop owners and extend conversations. In this phase, they gathered the community's ideas and visions for the future. Issues on the agenda during the workshops included: local lifestyle, development, landscape, and street signs. Together they voted on the most important and urgent aspects.

Through this process, Vision Union found out that issues like 'Aesthetic education,' 'Pedestrian Flow' and 'Sign restrictions' were what mattered the most to the community. Following this, they invited professionals of urban planning, urban design, architecture, landscape, marketing, and advertising to discuss ideas with the shop owners that participated and to help them understand the value of design for the overall urban street landscape and development.

These workshops helped break the ice between designers and shop owners and made the redesign action easier to complete.

STREET SIGN EXAMPLES: NEW AESTHETICS FOR A HISTORIC STREET

The project redesigned nine commercial signs of long-time family-run businesses in the street. Each design was based on the shop's history, iconic items or style:

1. Vintage collectibles shop: The designer and owners decided to use old coins as the sign's main image. The sign's colour and texture were inspired by the setting and the architecture's façade materials.
2. Camera shop: A bold black colour was used to emphasise a professional brand image.
3. Tailor shop: A traditional sewing machine was chosen as the icon. Its colours were neutral black and grey to reflect the shop's commitment to traditional suiting.
4. Shoe shop: The aim was to create a simple and recognisable brand. So, they decided to let the architecture become part of the commercial sign design, and used a low chroma colour to create a revival style.



Vision Union hopes that these processes can gradually improve public aesthetics, connections and lifestyle, so we may have a more friendly and unique public life, not individually, but collectively as a community."





Tailor shop before (left), and after (right).



Car Parts Retail Founding Store before (left), and after (right).



Electronic shop before (left), and after (right).

5. Automobile company office: This company has been a significant presence in the community for years. Ultimately the design scale expanded to include the building's façade. They decided to change the façade back to the original version as when the company first started.
6. Electronics shop: A simple circuit diagram was used as the main image. Eventually, the designer and owners decided to redesign the building's whole façade to go with the new aesthetic.

DO'S

- **The key is to gather residents and business owners to have conversations and reach collective decisions.** This means that the new rules weren't decided by any one person but collectively agreed upon by what was deemed most urgent and important.
- **Use minimalism as a visual strategy.** This choice helps to simplify the historic street's entire landscape and to create a more coherent aesthetic. This new look may result in other shop owners buying into the idea and replacing their own signs.
- **Create momentum for your discussion on street signs, public space and façade design.** Having a master plan for the area would make it easier for shop owners to participate and articulate the public and individual benefits for the entire street landscape and district development.

DON'TS

- When persuading residents and business owners of the importance of city aesthetics, **don't forget that ownership status is a deciding factor.** It is often easier to execute ideas with property owners than with tenants.