

Landmark Decisions

Written by Alex Baer
Sunday, 07 February 2016 17:04

And now, a word about Landmark Decisions: *Boxy*.

(No, not like the hyper *vlogger*, nor like those who boil down everything to thinking in-or-outside of that very same box -- but, well, *squarish*. You know, like a box -- not, *um*, square-ish, like not being hip or very uncool.
Uh
, to quote a Monty Python sketch:
Wait, I'll come in again...
)

As I began: *Landmark Decisions* -- no, wait, *hang on, hang on*. No running away in panic is required here. There'll be no airing of legal briefs, or any other kind, here today -- much to the relief of all concerned.

No, I was starting to warm up on the weirdly interwoven subjects of Time, Change, Culture, Cars, and Architecture.

Cars changed everything. (The vehicles, I mean -- although "Just What I Needed" surely shifted the landscape of the time a bit.)

As more Americans bought cars and became mobile, a sudden need bloomed for service providers all along their expanding driving routes -- restaurants, gas stations, places to sleep. The country went from sedate and, well, country-fied, to urgently urban, if not yet urbane.

The pace of change then was the beginning sign of just how quickly things were to continue changing in the decades and century ahead. Almost overnight, entrepreneurs and speculators streamed in to fill the need of these wandering carloads of spend-thrifts.

Here and there, a sense of advertising and brand identity took hold -- although it would be a

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very long time before anyone would define the notions as such, mostly because the need to defend a \$699.99 pricetag on a pair of sneakers was still decades away.

As competition grew among roadway service providers, the occasional good humor of the snack bar building shaped like a hot dog or ice cream bar grew, too. Such architectural shout-outs were no longer done simply to humor grandpa's idea of amusing artistic statement and tourism draw -- they were being done to stand out and to be seen, apart from all the rest of the hash-slingers who also hoped to snag a few bucks worth of business from the waterfalls of customers hurtling past in early land yachts.

That was then: the birth of the Roadside Attraction. You've seen them in movies (probably a hut which looks like a doughnut or a hot dog), or books (milk-bottle-shaped cafes), or in history books (jug taverns or even tacky wigwam motor courts) -- even in cartoons (the Brown Derby, anyone?).

Then, the nation decided we needed to go a whole faster, and cars kept up with that speed of thought -- but, the roads didn't. So, we abandoned a wealth of Americana along what became the back roads and scenic routes, and we slid into the fast lane of freeways.

We're going faster, and arriving faster, and are no happier for it, I would argue.

Of course, this may be a Zen thing, where the journey is at least as important (if not more so) as arriving at the destination. I imagine it depends if you're into the hurry-scurry, helter-skelter sort of a *constantly-electrocuted-living* lifestyle or not.

Looking out the window on the freeway now at -- there is nothing, or worse, these long, low squashed-flat boxes of buildings with all the invitation and charm of a rusted-through, bent-up tent peg. Less, even.

No time for art, or for buildings shaped like food, or what is sold inside. Utility is king, as is flexibility, for today's thriving business is tomorrow's pension-fund-drained bankruptcy, and XYZ Corp., which makes bovine and dairy calipers and grips will not want to house its headquarters

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inside a giant, *scary-not-funny* clown's head.

No, the first right of refusal on a building shaped like an enormous psycho-clown head? That should *absolutely* belong to the Republican National Committee, then, if they turn down such a righteous opportunity for truth in advertising, the offers should go even further downhill -- *hey, it is possible, you've seen the proof yourself* -- from there, to Koch Industries, say, the Heritage Foundation, to Fox, and so on, all the way down to the toadstool-dregs such as fifth-tier right-wingnut radio talk-show hosts, GOP Congresspeople, and useless dipsticks like Frank Luntz.

No, the only visual interruption or enrichment from the freeway is from what I call the Disney-World of ConsumptionLand -- what other people call Factory Outlet Stores and Malls. If you've never seen these acre-gulping sprawls, it appears they landed as intact fleets, as MotherShips to Capitalism, *BOOM, landed, set explosive anchors and turn on the plumbing.*

From the outside, the variety of architecture at these spots is arresting, eye-grabbing, but diabetic -- too saccharine-sweet, and too high a dose all at once. After the flatlands of natural growth, or the specific intentions of box-shaped buildings, ConsumptionLand leaves your eyeballs, brain, and spirit gasping for insulin and Dramamine.

These festive buildings of turreted towers and crenelated battlements are impressive, albeit in a stage-prop, false-front way, perfectly mirroring our Consumption Economy.

*

(Here, I need to excuse myself for a moment and sit on my hands, so I won't bore you with quotes from our country's Founders who said that the only lasting wealth comes from making things -- even though that is true -- and so, with my hands elsewhere, I won't also bore you on speculations on how our country is doing now, as a Consumer Economy, and after One Percenters have shipped all the manufacturing jobs overseas to preserve their bottom lines

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while depressing our country's.

Well, give me some credit. □ I nearly made it, that sitting-on-hands-bit, I mean.)

*

No, these Watchtowers and Guardposts of Capitalism are our cultural and heritage landmarks now -- concrete malls, masquerading as replacement village greens, and factory stores camouflaged in the window-dressing and facades of the latest of capitalism's sad temples.

Some fine Landmark Decisions we've made for ourselves. Just like the old company store system, and just like the Banana Republicans we have somehow, mysteriously, become.

*

OK, I admit it -- I never could quite see the value in some of the roadside attractions I see noted in books. Alligator farms would be right up there. Sorry -- I simply have no craving to see a gator eat a live chicken, not before my own lunch, and certainly not after.

I can take or leave giant balls of string, world's biggest frying pans, and so on, although I admire and appreciate such displays of patience in such an impatient era of *immediate-gratification-or-I 'm-gonna-bust-all-over-you!*

Still, I wouldn't mind having a view of giant, food-shaped buildings from my freeway-zipping windows. Such sights might beckon many people to blimp up and pack on even more excess weight, but, there are built-in safety features here: At some point, all progress will be halted to the next restaurant, as all their vehicle tires were blown out as soon as they rolled back aboard for the next groaning leg of the journey...

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However, I suspect we could all do with more instruction on self-control in this country. I also think we've had way too many decades of the customer being totally right, and immediately so -- so much so that we're getting our "need tantrums" (or, should we say *TanTrumps*, here in our political seasonings?) attended to a little too quickly than is good for our patience levels?

A nation thrumming along on a communal roar of ***I want what I want when I want it*** is a bit much, you know? No matter how good it might be for business -- it surely can't be good for us as a people. Already, we have impatient, over-catered people blowing through red lights, and too many self-important, petty tyrants refusing to sit down and compromise on agreements good for the country and its people.

A little patience, if exercised in daily life, based on a distinct daily need to actually do so, might even help us trim the rise in shootings. Just saying. After all, everything's connected.

*

Besides, there is a huge difference between "want" and "need." These lines of separation are the lines of distinction which advertising and marketing have successfully erased, with our subconscious blessing and ongoing reinforcement.

This is also true in our country of "thinking" and "feeling" -- distinctions no longer perceived by many, no longer felt, no longer thought about...

*

At any rate, I wouldn't mind more art and whimsy in life. Once upon a cafe counter stool, long ago, the differences in roadside cooking were actually considered one upside of taking a journey. Now, we have succumbed to the notion that We Must Go To A Chain Along The Freeway for its bland predictability. When did that get decided for us, exactly? (I must have been out of the room, or the decade -- could have been the 60s, I suppose...)

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But, hey -- if we can't have giant, faux-lettuce-ruffled Hamburger buildings and huge, gleaming, Milk Shake Canister snack bars, maybe we could at least have more interesting signage out in front of all the drab box-buildings. Signs are where the brand battles are being fought, anyway, when those branding skirmishes aren't erupting and rampaging all over the TV.

After all, it does me no good to try to see display lettering an eighth of an inch tall, way, way up on an 800-foot pole, hoping to attract my attention -- because, by the time I'm close enough to have the letters be big enough to read, I'd have to hang my head out the window, craning my head straight up, to see what all the electrical fuss was about.

At 70 miles an hour? (Well, people DO text and weave in and out of traffic blindly now -- as demonstrated by the pickup that "merged" into my lane by driving across the hood of my car...)

Plus, the flashbulb-rapidity of the new huge video signs isn't helping any, what with brightness and cycle-rate issues -- either they interfere with seeing traffic lights, or they develop snow blindness and cause retinal burns, or their strobe-like rapidity triggers epilepsy in people, inside their cars -- people who've *never-ever had epilepsy before*, at that.

(The signage industry must train their reps very hard, enough to sell chest freezers to Antarctic penguin communities -- either that, or American business owners will buy absolutely any new, bright, sparkly toy which comes along. Especially if it'll triple the electric bills for the country,)

However...

What possible harm can come from a well-illuminated, giant french fry, mounted in mid-air, slowly revolving? Or, for that matter, a long, low, ripple-roofed building made to *look* like a really *hum*
ongous
french fry just landed, MotherShip style?

(If nothing else, I would finally be able to walk in to such a restaurant, and order a "large fry," and then protest comically when I am handed a packet of small-fry fries, insisting I be given a

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"large fry," *like the one outside, on the sign -- the really large fry that's forty feet by ten feet.*
Now *that's* a large fry, is what
I'm sayin.')

Anyway: I wouldn't mind seeing large slices of pizza twirling slowly in the air, or onion rings -- or doughnuts -- being juggled in slow-mo, and giant colas and cubes being poured into cups, and what-not. Something to break up all the boxiness, I mean.

Oh, I'm sure there are good and valid reasons -- mostly financial- or fear-based, same difference -- for not having F-16-sized slabs of pizza dangling overhead, or having hovering childdogs up there, sporting dimensions of the Graf Zeppelin, but there must be some middle ground here besides "*boxy or nothing, buddy.*"

Of course, if I came out, as a neighbor, and found a giant, limp, and flaccid wedge of deflated pizza draped across my car, I might feel differently about things.

*

(By the way, the best possible way to lose money, I imagine, would probably be to open a tavern, maybe at a truck stop, or near a military base, and call it the Limp & Flaccid. □ I'm only passing this along, to help keep your somewhat unsavory acquaintances off your back -- the ones who always want a free ride on some investment notions. □ Yeah, the same ones who try to wheedle free medical information out of your sister, always showing her parts of their bodies in the hallway...)

*

As long as we're rethinking building shapes, I think it would be a great idea to expand the notion, although it does run the risk of discouraging people from learning to read -- just as McDonald's discouraged people from doing math, and thinking, when they took cash registers and put pictures of food items on the keys, so attendants wouldn't have to ring up prices, heavens forbid...

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Saying that, though, I could easily imagine the new U.S. Congress building looking like loosely stacked bars of gold bullion -- with the Congressional cafeteria serving their famous soup bouillon, complete with a floating armada of edible gold flakes, for visiting One Percenters, so that their dining fetishes may be instantly met!

The NRA headquarters -- I see that as a tombstone-shaped building. After all, their products do one thing, and one thing only, and resurrection or bath oil beads ain't it. Many would be pleased if the new Supreme Court Building looked like handcuffs -- something for all sides to agree on, as every American believes his or her rights are being forever hamstrung by everyone's else rights to be on their planet.

I think right-wing think-tank buildings should appear as instruments of medieval torture - the rack, or iron maidens, or ducking stools, or what-have-you. Then again, I am a real nut for that whole truth-in-advertising thing, and a big fan of irony and humor, so...

*

Churches and taverns, however, are trickier when it comes to shapes that these buildings might be housed in, so to speak. In one, some might say, there is supposed holy water and spirit; while in the other, other observers might venture, there is water, and holy spirits.

Adding cultural differences to the mix is no help -- not when there is a new church in China shaped like a violin, or across the way, geographically speaking, a new church in Taiwan shaped like a glass slipper.

Still, I applaud the effort to liven things up some. (And, it's a lot more upbeat than the mountain lion found in Idaho with teeth growing out of its forehead, you have to admit -- even in times of Trump-fizzles and Rubio-bashing. However, the Lenin statue that was given the Darth Vader makeover -- now, *that* one was worthwhile, and entertaining, on quite a few levels.)

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I suppose, for my money, I might want at least *one* church to look like the giant, flying stone head which Sean Connery cruises around in, from which he dispenses rifles and various deathly instruments to the masses, in the film, *Zardoz*.

You can't beat a giant, flying stone head for dramatic effect, when you're dealing with primitives, as the movie very clearly points out. Plus, I'm not sure we've come far from that general mode.

Meanwhile, the times? Well, *yeah* -- like the song says, *they are a-changing*, but not so much so that a giant, flying stone head, or a 757-sized beer can, might not still make some meaningful difference in our s
ooooooooo-
sophisticated little lives.

Maybe such life-changing decisions about our cultural landmarks will have to wait, until we get this next election out of the way. I have to say -- this one does feel more *Landmark* than *some* Decisions we've had to make at the polls.

But, then, it's always been a struggle, that Ongoing Battle between Sanity and Insanity. Maybe we should find a way to solidify and embody the notion of that particular, and particularly nasty, and everlasting, struggle -- and mount those edifices high on poles, at all points of immigration, all along our borders, just as fair warning to all who *dare* enter here.