

Neon signs are dying, but our appreciation isn't

By Christina Zdanowicz, CNN • Updated 25th July 2014



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The Frolic Room is one of the last great "dive bars" in Los Angeles, Daniel said. The joint evokes a lot of nostalgia because he's been there so many times. "It represents the old Hollywood of yesteryear," he said.

Courtesy Brian H. Daniel

A few years ago, **Brian H. Daniel** was driving around Los Angeles when he spotted a neon sign for a random storage facility. The [red stick figures](#) carrying yellow boxes glowed from the mundane building. It was like it was screaming out to him.

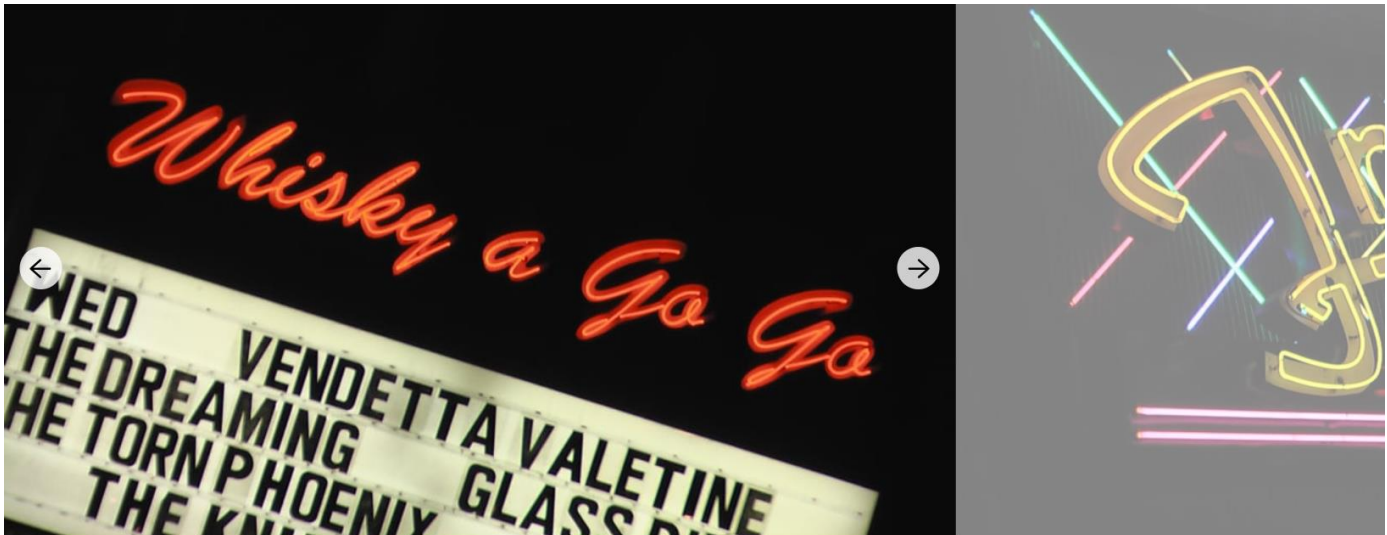
Daniel loved how a sign could go from ordinary and unremarkable during the day to "talking to you" at night. L.A.'s neon won over the frequent traveler, who has concluded the City of Angels has the best neon anywhere.

"They have just enough peppered through the city where it just comes alive," said Daniel, a Chicago-based headhunter. "I was so compelled by it that for two weeks I just drove around and took pictures of neon signs."

What's disappointing for enthusiasts like Daniel is that neon is dying. Businesses are switching to cheaper, more energy-efficient LED bulbs and municipal planning boards are zoning out neon to decrease the number of unsightly displays.

"Neon spent most of its career in this country more hated than loved in terms of being banned and put under zoning ordinances," said neon historian Thomas Rinaldi. "It's an iconic part of the 20th century, but it's been legislated out of existence in some places. There's a vindictive attitude toward it."

Neon lights weren't always losing ground. They were once in LED's shoes, beating out an old mode of lighting.



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Los Angeles' neon signs beckoned frequent traveler Brian H. Daniel during his visit in 2007. "They have just enough peppered through the city where it just comes alive," said the Chicago resident.

Courtesy Brian H. Daniel

In 1902, just a few years after neon gas was discovered by British chemists, French engineer Georges Claude sent it coursing through electrified glass tubes, creating neon lighting. The new type of light quickly ousted incandescent bulbs, the former favorite of sign-makers.

Claude started marketing neon signs in Europe and in the early 1920s came to America, where neon's popularity exploded, said Rinaldi.

In the 1930s, neon was everywhere in America. In the beginning of the decade, shops saw the glowing lights as a novelty, though an expensive one, to keep them competitive. They were installed for big corporate chain retailers like car dealers. But by the end of the decade, big businesses had found cheaper alternatives.

At that point, neon became associated with less desirable businesses, Rinaldi said. Think seedy hotels.

Despite the connotation, neon continued to be a "powerhouse industry" from the '40s through the '60s but began a steady decline in the 1970s as even small businesses found cheaper ways to advertise. Some cities came to view the lighting as tacky and overly commercial.

Not many people would know now, but Vancouver was covered in neon until it became vilified. People said the signs were garish and distracted from the city's natural beauty.



Mel's Drive-In, a famous neon sign in Los Angeles.

Courtesy Brian H. Daniel

"They're outsized, outlandish, and outrageous. They're desecrating our buildings, cluttering our streets, and -- this is the final indignity -- blocking our view of some of the greatest scenery in the world," Vancouver Sun columnist Tom Ardies wrote in 1966, as quoted in a 2011 Sun article.

It wasn't just Vancouver turning off the neon. The Big Apple went from tens of thousands of signs in the '70s to just a few hundred across the five boroughs today, said Rinaldi, author of "New York Neon."

Across the United States, the use of neon signs saw another sharp dip in the late 2000s, according to a survey by trade magazine Signs of the Times. Signs were illuminated by 33% neon and 23% LEDs in 2007, but the tables had turned by 2010. By then LEDs more than doubled the use of neon, 40% to 18%. In the last few years, even Hong Kong, with its rows of iconic neon-lit streets, has started to turn to LEDs.

Despite its commercial decline, neon has still enjoyed periods of popularity as an art form, experts say. "It's that color, it's that light," said Kim Koga, an artist who started working with neon in the late '80s, and is now the director of the [Neon Art Museum](#) in Los Angeles. "It's kind of magical, even though it's a mixture of a chemistry project and magic."

For Houston native and long-time neon fan Randall Brelsford, the lighting is a message from another time.

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