In January 2007, an extraordinary thing happened in São Paulo, Brazil, a vast, wild city not especially known for its urban planning: A comprehensive ban on all forms of outdoor advertising, including rooftop signs, passed into law (Burgoyne, 2007; Garfield & Galvao, 2007; Rohter, 2006). The result—as captured most memorably by photographer Tony de Marco—is what to some might appear part of an improbable but glorious utopia, a culture-jammer’s dream; to others, a desecration, the stuff of totalitarian nightmares. This, at least, is how it has played out in the media, on blogs, and in the Flickr photograph set “São Paulo No Logo,” where de Marco’s astonishing shots can be seen (de Marco, 2007).

Being at the tail end of “Logo Cities,” a three-year research/creation project on signs and branding in urban space, I was particularly drawn to this news story. First, the images bear an uncanny resemblance to the kind of fanciful artwork one might find in *Adbusters* magazine. Second, and most important, I think, were the responses of the ad men whose livelihoods seemed to be most threatened by this development. One suggested that the city’s streets would now be less safe because of the loss of illuminated signs; the Brazilian Association of Advertisers called the new law “fascist” (Burgoyne, 2007), while unnamed sources likened the city to North Korea and communist Eastern Europe. This view was echoed by Dalton Silvano, a city councillor, who said: “I think this city will become a sadder, duller place. . . . [W]hen you’re in your car, or alone on foot, [advertising is] a form of entertainment that helps relieve solitude and boredom” (quoted in Rohter, 2006).

Why would advertising people, whose job it is to make hyperbole credible, come up with such incredible—if not downright silly—arguments? Perhaps, like most of us, they have very little sense of how to respond, precisely because the events in São Paulo were so unlikely. Most of us have grown up in highly commercialized media environments, in which every surface, every nook and cranny of daily life, is also an advertising opportunity. If this is the very air we all breathe from the day we are born, no wonder we are at a loss as to how to talk about its potential or actual absence.

Logo Cities, then, has been concerned with presence: the abundance of huge illuminated signs, logos, and branding devices that “adorn”—if that is the right
word for it—the skylines of many cities across the world, understood as one component of “public lettering” (Baines & Dixon, 2003; Bartram, 1975; Gray, 1960; Henkin, 1998; Kinneir, 1980; Petrucci, 1993; Rama, 1996; Sutton, 1965). And signs are “not quite architecture”: in most urban contexts, commercial signs are appendages, extensions, additions, screens, afterthoughts. They colonize the surfaces of the city but rarely contribute substantially to its functionality—its capacity to shelter or convey its populace as workers, consumers, or private citizens. As Brazilian journalist Vinicius Galvão notes with regard to São Paulo, “[I]n a lot of parts of the city we never realized there was a big shantytown. People were shocked because they never saw that before, just because there were a lot of billboards covering the area” (Garfield & Galvão, 2007).

Signs are, however, linked intrinsically to the dominant preoccupations of the city: high-rise logos, treated as arrays or even constellations, describe the commercial, financial, civic, even religious priorities of a particular urban locale eloquently—especially at night (cf. the “unintended sublime” in Nye, 1994). In Montréal, for example, the downtown core (called Ville Marie—the city’s former name) lies between Mont Royal and the northern shore of the St. Lawrence River. On the waterfront is a spectacular vestige of the city’s industrial past, a huge neon sign erected in 1948 atop a vast flour mill (opened two years earlier), which, after two modifications, now reads “Farine Five Roses.” On top of Mont Royal is a giant metal cross, built in 1924, illuminated in outline at night by many individual white lights; these lights are now fibre optic, and they turn purple to signal the death of the pope. Between these two markers are myriad high-rise branding devices, which we have inventoried on the Logo Cities website. The advertisers include utilities (Hydro Québec, Bell, Telus, Rogers), banks (Banque Nationale, Bank of Montréal, CIBC, Scotiabank), insurance companies (Desjardins), and hotels (Sheraton, Holiday Inn, Marriott, Delta), along with Molson Breweries, Radio-Canada/CBC, and CN (the headquarters of Canadian National/Canadien National, Canada’s largest railway company).

Logo Cities began with a fundamental commitment to the idea that we currently live in a “hypercommercial” (McChesney, 2000) culture, in which the unprecedented concentration of media ownership and control has led to the gradual and continual erosion of the boundaries between editorial and advertising and to “commercial carpetbombing” (McChesney, 2000)—in other words, the placement of advertising and branding messages on every available surface and as the primary organizing factor of every conceivable medium. This point is not lost on Naomi Klein, author of the international bestselling book *No Logo* (Klein, 2000). She writes,

[A]s more and more companies seek to be the one overarching brand under which we consume, make art, even build our homes, the entire concept of public space is being redefined. And within these real and virtual branded edifices, options for unbranded alternatives, for open debate, criticism and uncensored art—for real choice—are facing new and ominous restrictions. (Klein, 2000, pp. 130-131)

In this environment, the placement of logos on high-rises can be understood as a strategic conflation of the age-old civic practice of naming otherwise anony-
mous buildings with the contemporary imperative for ubiquitous brand exposure. A city skyline awash in prominent logos, then, is indicative of a profound imbalance between the wants of marketers and the needs of citizens, as was made clear in the civic wrangling in São Paulo. This is also precisely the terrain I have explored with Logo Cities, through a series of creative, Web-based interventions encouraging reflection on the cultural role played by signs, that is, above and beyond their instrumental functions.

“Ad creep,” as the most obvious symptom of hypercommercialism, is not restricted to city skylines. As advertisers and marketers scramble over one another to avoid the “clutter” they have generated themselves, they clamour for exclusive ownership of new places and spaces through which they can insinuate their brands into everyday life. Another illuminating example of this practice is to be found in “mainstream” movies: in the last 20 years, we have seen an explosion of purposeful brand appearances in Hollywood films, the emergence of an industry dedicated to “branded entertainment,” and the establishment of a trade group (the Entertainment Resources and Marketing Association) to represent and legitimize the interests of product placement agencies. Hence my related project “Brand Hype” (www.brandhype.org), an online media literacy resource all about product placement in the movies, featuring my earlier critical video Behind the Screens (2000) in its entirety, alongside a purpose-built database called “Movie Mapper.” Movie Mapper currently contains detailed information on every brand appearance in over 200 movies: when, what, for how long. It is also searchable (by brand name, actor, director, title, and so on) and collaborative: anyone can sign up and start adding movies. Importantly, or perhaps perversely, Movie Mapper has also attracted several registrants from the product placement industry; furthermore, Behind the Screens remains at the top of the list of resources on product placement on the website of the American Marketing Association. It seems there is a very thin line between “why they should not do it” and “how we might do it more effectively."

The Logo Cities website (www.logocities.org) contains historical notes on Montréal’s sign bylaws; voice recordings of “sign stories” offered by members of the public; a specially commissioned comic by Grant Collins; an interactive skyline with information on each illuminated sign; a “database documentary” called Almost Architecture, produced using the Korsakow System; a short bibliography; and an editorial section. The Logo Cities Symposium, held at Concordia University in May 2007, demonstrated the importance of signs to scholars from a variety of backgrounds. It featured an international roster of around 30 speakers from fine arts, design, architecture, visual studies, art history, and communication studies. The event closed with the Québec premiere of Helvetica (a documentary about this seminal typeface, which appears on a great many signs across the world), which was attended by over 600 people.

The development of Brand Hype followed a more-or-less predictable trajectory in terms of its outcomes, but Logo Cities has been full of surprises. While maintaining my commitment to the hypercommercialism thesis, I have also found myself embroiled in a series of local community debates about the preservation of certain signs. Indeed, it has become very apparent that whereas a great many
signs are mass produced, manufactured with minimal craft using the cheapest viable materials (think of any supermarket chain, or fast-food outlet, or bank), and sport dreary or poorly designed “modern” logos, for diverse urban communities, there are often a few signs that have a special cultural resonance.

This is in fact something my graduate assistants and I experienced viscerally while setting up the Logo Cities gallery show, which ran concurrently with the symposium. Having trucked around the city collecting recently discarded “landmark” signs in various states of decrepitude, we all felt the very meaning of these everyday material artifacts change as they were wheeled, carried, or dragged gently into the gallery space. Indeed, they suddenly seemed to demand a heightened degree of care and respect as they were variously hoisted or heaved into place. Through recontextualization, their materiality was foregrounded—through evidence of their manufacture; a patina of weathering, peeling, and rusting; and their sheer mass.

It is the quotidian aspects of urban signage that underscore their significance for some of us: a resonance born from familiarity that grows over time, a sense of “localness” or belonging, and a spark of nostalgia for the personal and cultural histories they speak. Not surprisingly, large rooftop signs have been written about, sung about, and appeared in movies such as *Strictly Ballroom* (1992), *Moulin Rouge* (2001), and *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007). Specific examples that come to mind, which may be familiar only to Montréalers, are the signs for the Simcha’s and Warshaw stores on boulevard Saint-Laurent on the Plateau; Ben’s Restaurant on boulevard de Maisonneuve; the enormous Farine Five Roses sign near the old port (which has given its name to songs by québécois musicians Ilkae, Ariane Moffatt, and Miracle Fortress); and the 1930s Guaranteed Milk bottle, a huge, camouflage water tower on boulevard de Maisonneuve that had a prominent role in the outlandish Dusan Makavejev film *Sweet Movie* (1974). The first three businesses have closed down in the past seven years; the Farine Five Roses sign has lost its *raison d’être* since the Five Roses brand was sold to Smucker’s by ADM, and it will reportedly be taken down as soon as it is deemed unsafe. There was considerable public outcry when, in the wake of its deal with Smucker’s, ADM simply turned off the sign. Rumours regarding the fate of the Guaranteed Milk bottle surface periodically, but its future remains uncertain.

Here, then, are some of the ironies of urban promotional signage: communities are rarely consulted about the installation of such signs, and planners are often mollified, it seems, by nods toward civic duty, as when signs incorporate clocks or temperature read-outs. The longer a promotional sign is in place, the more it becomes part of the urban fabric, and hence “ours.” When businesses eventually close or their signs become redundant, it is anyone’s guess who will take, or save, the signs. Will ADM—the huge agrochemical conglomerate that bought the mill and associated silos (and hence the rooftop sign) from Ogilvie Flour Mills in 1993-1994—or Smucker’s, the new owners of the brand, make any gesture at all in terms of community consultation before tearing down the sign sometime in the next few months or perhaps years? It seems doubtful indeed.

This flashing neon sign with 15-foot-high letters has been an uncompromising fixture on the city’s skyline for over 60 years. Are the generations of
Montréalers who have been advertised to relentlessly in this manner owed something in return? What does it say about us if we develop a sentimental attachment to hulking pieces of promotional hardware? And what of signs that clearly “mean” so much more than was ever intended by their owners? (This is quite aside from people who are understandably indifferent to, or perhaps even detest, signs.) There are of course a few isolated instances of thoughtful intervention and/or preservation: the gargantuan Pepsi-Cola sign in Long Island City, the OXO Tower in London, the outdoor Neon Museum in Las Vegas, a recent neon-sign-preservation initiative in Vancouver, the American Sign Museum in Cincinnati, and the Buchstaben Museum in Berlin.

In sum, Logo Cities has served to underscore the overdetermined nature of our relationships with urban logos and branding devices; indeed, our connections are far more complex than the reductive logic of branding might suggest. My current work, under the auspices of the newly founded Centre for Research on Signs and Public Lettering (CRSPL), aims to push some of these questions further. Enseignes Montréal Signs is a Wikipedia-style Web resource about lost and extant signs in Montréal, which is currently being designed and programmed; everyone, from archivists and scholars to local bloggers, will be encouraged to contribute information, anecdotes, photos, sounds, and videos on any signs they feel are important. By leveraging residual interest in signs, we may then access local knowledges about neighbourhoods, workplaces, and city life more generally. I have also begun collecting old signs from recently closed local businesses (Ben’s, Warshaw, Monsieur Hotdog, the Paramount cinema) and am developing a plan to display some of these on the university campus. Finally, I am working on an open-ended collaborative art project focusing exclusively on the Farine Five Roses sign (www.farinefiveroses.ca). This is framed as a creative opportunity for the public to “speak back” to one especially storied sign, through anagrams (“farinagrams”), sketches from memory, cellphone videos, Flickr photos, et cetera. My own contribution is a series of whimsical ideas for urban installations predicated on recycling the sign’s letters. For example: echoing the “Hollywood” sign, I propose a OUI/NON referendum indicator on Mont Royal. Whereas the cross on the mountain turns purple when the pope dies, the referendum indicator could be lit up to reflect the counting of votes, in real time, should Québec once more address formally the question of separation. Another example is inspired by the way in which some huge signs apparently excuse themselves by also being clocks or temperature indicators. My weather indicator is an adaptation of the current scaffold supporting the Farine Five Roses sign, eliminating the brand-name entirely and rearranging the letters in an asymmetrical grid that would spell out the impending forecast. This whimsy would allow ADM to confirm its civic-mindedness, but it is rendered all the more impossible since the proposal only works in English—a covert nod to the history of signage laws in Québec and to ADM/Smucker’s current pretext for removing the sign.

As for Brand Hype, a major oversight on my part was not setting aside part of the budget to provide analytical tools for the Movie Mapper database that would allow the visitor to immediately test hypotheses and pose questions, such as, “Which genres of films are most likely to feature the placement of tobacco prod-
ucts?” or, “Which studio (or star, or director) has been most friendly to placements, and when?” or, “What is the frequency of brand-name appearances as a movie plays, in a given genre and decade?” These questions could be answered instantaneously using “data visualization,” an emergent practice that facilitates on-screen 2-D and 3-D visualization of the information stored in complex databases.

While the cultural effects of advertising can be oppressive and even pernicious, some of its material residue stands as eloquent, if mute, testament to the complexities of cultural and material life, and this is the terrain I have attempted to explore through Logo Cities and, latterly, the CRSPL. Brand Hype, meanwhile, offers a window into a late-twentieth-/early-twenty-first-century marketing strategy that may yet exhaust itself, as movies become as cluttered with advertising as every other cultural space is—except perhaps São Paulo.

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