

Eye on Evanston: Thoughts on Design | Local proponent of good design keeps focus for over 50 years

by [Ellen Galland, Design Evanston](#) February 14th, 2022

Graphic designer Jack Weiss moved to Evanston in 1967 and continues to live in his “favorite town” after more than five decades. His design firm, [Jack Weiss Associates](#), was established in Evanston in 1977. As a graphic designer, his work includes logo and communication materials, wayfinding signage, donor walls, books and murals.



Jack Weiss. (2017 photo by Bill Smith/Evanston Now)

While nationally prominent in his field, Weiss is remarkable in that his work output has dovetailed so often with his community interests. He has worked on more than 400 major projects, ranging from printed communications and visual identity programs to signage and wayfinding systems, many of them with a connection to Evanston businesses, government, not-for-profits or community groups. He has used his design skills to support the Evanston school board as well as City Council and mayoral candidates and has occasionally taken on the broader role of community organizer. Weiss received the Mayor’s Award for the Arts in 2014 from then-Mayor Elizabeth Tisdahl.

Three of Evanston’s gateway entrances are marked by 12-foot-tall brick and limestone pylons that Weiss designed in 1989. Weiss said the materials, which are often associated with Evanston’s architectural styles, were chosen to convey a sense of civic dignity and permanence.



Sheridan Road Evanston gateway pylon. (Photo by Jack Weiss)

The upper limestone portions have incised letters informing viewers that Evanston was founded in 1863. Their typeface is Optima, a flared serif classical typeface, “like what you see on Greek columns,” Weiss said.

At the time it was suggested that the lettering be filled in and darkened, but Weiss rejected that idea and says that it is the shadows that define the letters. The budget at the time provided for up-lighting the signs, but only for minimal landscaping. The overall intent, he said, was to create an image of Evanston as a desirable destination.

In 1997 Weiss designed the city’s comprehensive wayfinding signage program, which also included some “Welcome to Evanston” signs. He said that the program involved anticipating what was needed to help residents and visitors get where they wanted to go. He said the biggest challenge was not the design of the signs, but rather managing the design constraints dictated by the scope of the project.

A lengthy research and planning process was needed to determine the number and locations of signs, and their specifications and content. Wording, length of words and type size were all

designed to ensure ease of reading by drivers going by at varying speeds. More than 250 signs were designed for over 40 locations. Critical to the project’s success was Weiss’ collaboration with city staff and multiple civic organizations.



Ridge Avenue Evanston “Welcome” sign. (Photo by Jack Weiss)

In 2001 Weiss designed the signage and donor wall at the Levy Senior Center. Weiss believes that graphic artists (and book designers) should consider readers’ eyesight challenges when they design. He thinks about readability, line spacing, line lengths, type size, consistency of letter spacing and contrast.



The Levy Senior Center primary sign and donor recognition wall. (Photos by Jack Weiss)

For the Levy Center signs, he researched which fonts work best for viewers with vision challenges. In this case he used Futura small caps, which is easier for seniors and others with vision issues to read. In keeping with his view that signage should be contextual, he applied the concept to the donor wall. Gift levels on the wall are symbolized by reproductions of the leaves of some of Evanston's most common parkway trees. A ginkgo leaf signifies major donors.

Weiss' involvement with the Oakton Historic District in 2009 ranged from initiating the idea for the district, convening and chairing the committee, and designing the logo and all other communications materials. He and his committee members prepared the successful nomination for the National Register of Historic Places. The Oakton Historic District signs which Weiss designed are still in place, as are those he designed for Evanston's other historic districts.



Oakton Historic District gateway sign. (Photo by Jack Weiss)

Weiss designed branding, marketing materials and signage for several of developer Optima's Evanston buildings. Asked about his approach to design, Weiss commented, "I always try to relate the signage design to details found in the architecture." For the 2002 Optima Towers condominium building (also known as the orange balcony building at the time), Weiss designed the Sherman Avenue gateway sign so that it was integrated into the building's landscaped courtyard. In 2004 at the Optima Horizons condominium building, he used the red horizontal sunshade detail as a sign, rotating it 90 degrees to stand on its end. It became the project's primary identification sign on Elgin Road.





The Optima Towers and Optima Horizons signs. (Photos by Jack Weiss)

In 2014 Weiss, working with myriad local businesses and other interested parties, spearheaded the introduction of the annual Open House Chicago into Evanston, the first suburb to take part. Since then, nearly 20 Evanston sites have been included in this annual event which features “self-guided history and architecture trails throughout Chicago, talks and programming, and behind-the-scenes access to architecturally, historically and culturally significant sites across the city.”

To acknowledge the 100th anniversary of the beginning of train service on what was then the North Shore Line, Weiss designed a mural at the Davis Street Station, the line’s starting point to Milwaukee. He played with the abstract letterforms of the NSL logo. The mural, “North Shore Line,” was installed in 2016. The design was based on Weiss’s interest in the abstract forms of typography from his days as a design student at Yale and his longtime fascination with the work of Norman Ives, one of his teachers there.



North Shore Line mural at Davis Street CTA Station. (Photo by Jack Weiss)

Another Yale teacher, the photographer Walker Evans, inspired Weiss to pursue photography as a parallel interest. Over the years Weiss has held four exhibitions of his work in Evanston galleries. Three of the shows featured Weiss' take on people and places in southern India, and Weiss says the photos reflected Evans' way of seeing the world.



Photograph: "Hawkers, Madurai, India 7.14.11." (Photo by Jack Weiss)

Beyond his Evanston base and professional practice, Weiss is president of the [Chicago Design Archive](#), a not-for-profit that he co-founded in 2002. It is a digital collection of Chicago designers' work in the areas of experiential design, product design and graphic design. Chicago has an important history in these areas, he says.

Weiss continues to advocate for good design. As one of the founding members of Design Evanston, a past president and now its communications director, he works on raising awareness of good design in the community.

Weiss was project manager, co-author and designer of two recent books on Evanston architecture and designers. In 2013 he chaired a five-person committee that produced the book "Evanston: 150 Years 150 Places." In 2020 he collaborated with six other Design Evanston members on "Evanston's Design Heritage," a compendium of essays about 136 Evanston architects, designers, landscape architects and planners.



“Evanston: 150 Years 150 Places” and “Evanston’s Design Heritage” books. (Photo by Jack Weiss)

Weiss’s career is a look at the significance, ubiquity and range of graphic design in “his” Evanston community.

Design Evanston’s “Eye on Evanston” articles focus on Evanston’s design history and advocate for good design. Visit designevanston.org to learn more about the organization.