I'm weary of Route 66. It seemed just a personal quirk until American Heritage Magazine recently named the "Mother Road" the most over-rated highway.

Let me explain. It's not Route 66 itself I'm tired of. Cruising on Central Avenue in Albuquerque at sundown or checking into the Wigwam Motel in Holbrook are two of the most sublime joys available to retro highway connoisseurs.

No, it's the oodles of Route 66 kitsch and Kmart's Route 66 clothing line that annoys me. It's when you explain to a new acquaintance your fascination with commercial archaeology and they manage to immediately pigeonhole you, replying with a dismissive, "Oh, you're into that Route 66 stuff". Certainly the highway's popularity has an incalculable positive impact on the many topics that interest SCA membership; however, a much-revered edge is lost going mainstream.

It is with this aforementioned bias that I read a recent publication by Lisa Mahar, who may be familiar to readers from her previous award-winning book, Grain Elevators (Princeton Architectural Press, 1993). Her new offering, American Signs: Form and Meaning on Route 66, focuses on another overlooked beacon--motel signs. She terms them, "a significant, and often misunderstood, idiosyncratic American icon". Whether she selected Route 66 as her petri dish for the fame attached to the highway or for the plethora of motels found alongside it is irrelevant. Mahar has composed, in my opinion, a landmark work in our genre.

A visual tour de force, American Signs combines contemporary and historical photography, meticulous diagrams and clearly written text to examine the evolution of motel signs along Route 66. The publication thrives on this synergistic connection since, as Mahar notes, "Books about form that rely primarily on text make it difficult for the reader to visualize the subject, and photographic surveys often lack thoughtful analysis."


Sign forms, materials, typography, colors, symbols, names, placement--and the forces that brought each into use--are documented, revealing broad cultural themes for each period. The book is brimming with nearly 500 photographs, most taken by the author. Some are dramatic, full-color photos; others often serve a more utilitarian purpose as components of the 168 diagrams that propel the reader whenever a snapshot or words aren't adequate. Diagrams clearly illustrate topics (forms of the roadside star symbol) or articulate complex concepts (analyzing how various signs appear to motorists cruising at different speeds). A striking effect is achieved on the diagrams, and throughout the book, by use of a brilliant red hue to highlight the black and white printing.

Even with these impressive visual aids, it's often the text that leaves the most lasting impression. The author's wit shines through when she refers to the signs constructed in the 1970s as "culturally inert", a simple--but staggeringly accurate term--worth a thousand pictures. The phrase will undoubtedly elicit a chuckle every time I pass yet another nondescript "Budget Motel" with a dreary plastic sign.
Like an effective roadside advertisement, the book works on several levels. At its most basic, *American Signs* is an entertaining trip down America's most famous highway. Its strong visual element entices examination from those with even a casual interest. But *American Signs* shouldn't be considered merely an attractive book to be perused and set aside on the coffee table.

No, Mahar aims higher and hits her target. Publications in our nascent field are often steeped in enthusiasm but fall short on insight. *American Signs* is like a film you instinctively enjoy but need to view repeatedly to fully comprehend. The book's sharp design may initially conceal its wealth of information. In the introduction, the author declares her challenging research intentions:

"(*American Signs*) is an analysis of the complex processes by which these signs were created, from conception to placement along the highway. And it is an examination of how and why motel signs have changed over time and what those changes tell us about the people who made and used them. Careful attention to signs made during those years...provides insight into changes not only in the signs themselves but also in patterns of transportation, work, and leisure and in regional and national traditions and economies."

Some elaborate concepts are put forth in the book; however, most ideas are digestible without too much work. For example, of interest to SCA members researching segregation topics is the discussion of Colonial and antiquity elements such as Chippendale borders, lanterns, servants, shields, and crowns as popularized on signs in the 1960s. The author hypothesizes that they did not so much emphasize service but exclusivity and wealth, and were used primarily to reinforce longstanding divisions of class and race.

Armed with *American Signs*, the often-cacophonous roadside can produce a surprising harmony. While focusing on Route 66, many concepts can be applied to your local strip. The book provides a much-needed foundation for those initially attracted by sign aesthetics, thereby enabling them to more fully appreciate the roadsides they covet, photograph and research. Instead of simply documenting the charm of roadside advertisements, it aids in understanding the genesis and evolution of that beauty. As co-founder of the New York architecture and design firm MAP, Mahar possesses the sophisticated tools needed for an examination of this magnitude.

For enthusiasts wanting to make that leap from mere appreciation to understanding the roadside in a larger context, *American Signs* is an excellent--and perhaps necessary--guide. Previously, I admired the breathtaking signs and neon vistas having only a rudimentary comprehension of what gave them life and form. Now I'm much better equipped to decipher the forces that created the roadside we admire. And this makes travel oh so much more interesting....

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The Gateway Arch represents the beginning of the American West. It also commemorates St. Louis’s role in the nation’s westward expansion. Early settlers in the 1800s depended on the city as a final chance to stock up on food and other provisions before making the long journey west.

"The Main Street of America," Route 66, has become a myth and a legend in American culture. From the very beginning not only does the road serve as a means of transport, but also presents a large number of symbols. Undeniably, three of these symbols should be strongly emphasized (Carney 2001). Route 66, known as "America’s Highway," is iconic (Ronca 2012). Iconic means that is "acting as a sign or symbol of something" (Hornby 2010). The highway is iconic because is acting as an extremely important symbol “a symbol of a changing America (Ronca 2012). Route 66, from Chicago to LA, epitomises that element of the American dream that is “on the road” almost as much as that other icon of mobile America, the motel. The symbol that lies between drivers and their beds is the motel sign. This book is a history of the motel sign on Route 66.

"Signs," writes Maher, “represent a concrete physical manifestation of an idea held in the mind of the maker. In this sense, signs can reveal the beliefs and values of the men who made them. Innovations or mutations to existing patterns of sign composition generally represent other, larger changes economic, po