

Visual Analysis: Yellowtown

The aesthetics of poverty, the graphic design of urgency

Karen Lewis
College of Design
University of Kentucky

Pawn shops, pay-day-advance brokers, national check cashiers, gun and ammunition suppliers, discount cigarettes, beer, and liquor, 24-hour locksmiths, and automotive repair shops (figure 1, following page) frequently use a bright, shiny, plastic, primarily-yellow colored signage to identify themselves. These businesses, aimed especially at those in a state of urgency or distress, are often located in the poorest areas of the city.

Because of the consistency of the use of the color yellow by these urgent businesses, and because of the limited areas where they appear “to belong,” a massing of yellow signage color codes the poorest parts of the city with a vivid wash of bright yellow. The result is a landscape which could be termed “Yellow Town.”

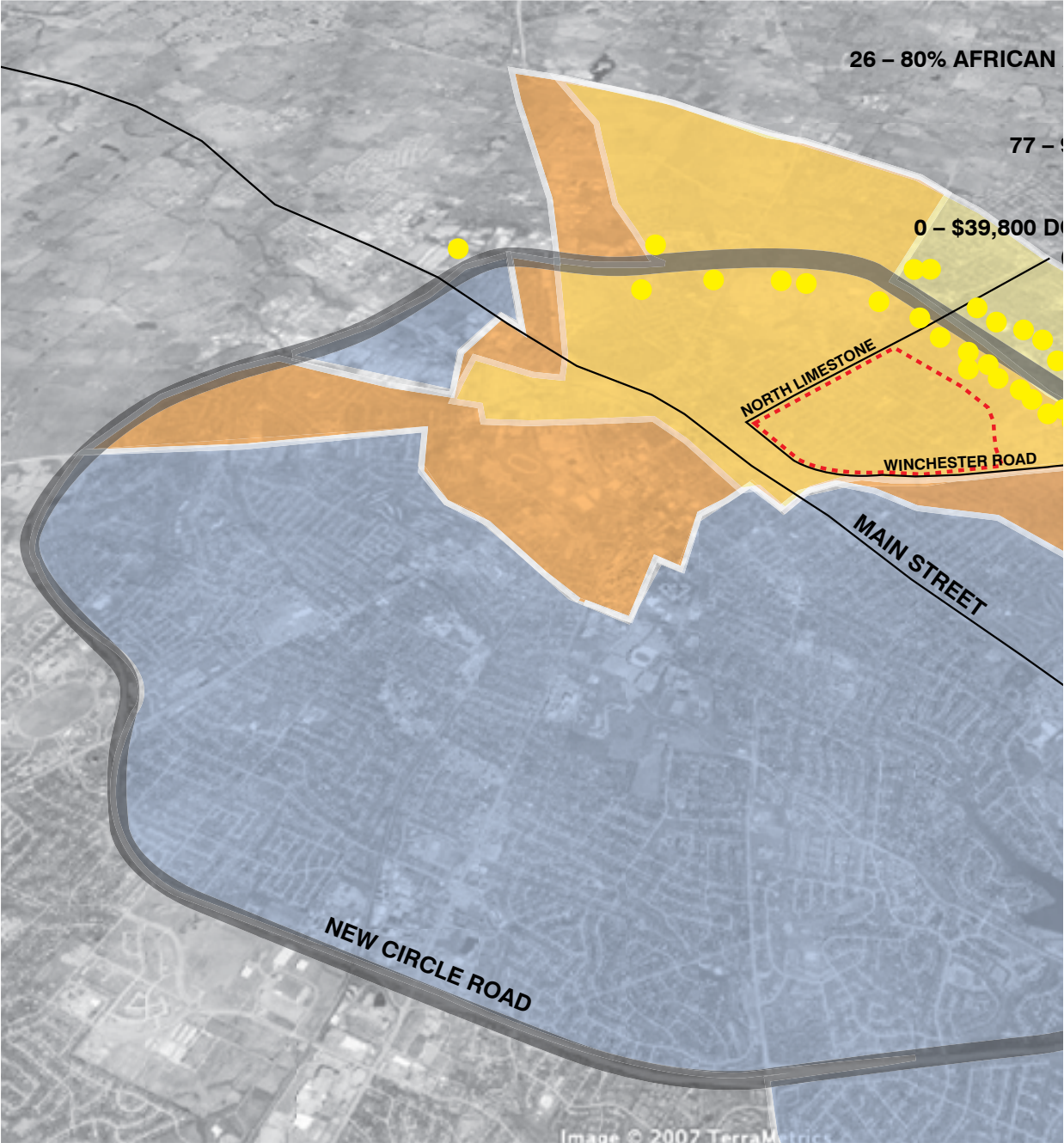
Yellow Town has been observed in several cities including Chicago, Illinois, Columbus, Ohio and most recently Austin, Texas. I choose to focus my research in Lexington, Kentucky for two reasons: Lexington’s commercial beltway, New Circle Road, is a good site to study “Yellow Town” because it encircles the entire city, and passes through several socio-economic conditions; second, because Lexington has a history of slavery and segregation, the socio-economic lines of wealthy citizens and impoverished citizens fall sharply along racial demographics (figure 2). Lexington is very much a city of wealthy white and poor black citizens, and these divisions are formalized in the city landscape.

Multi





Multi



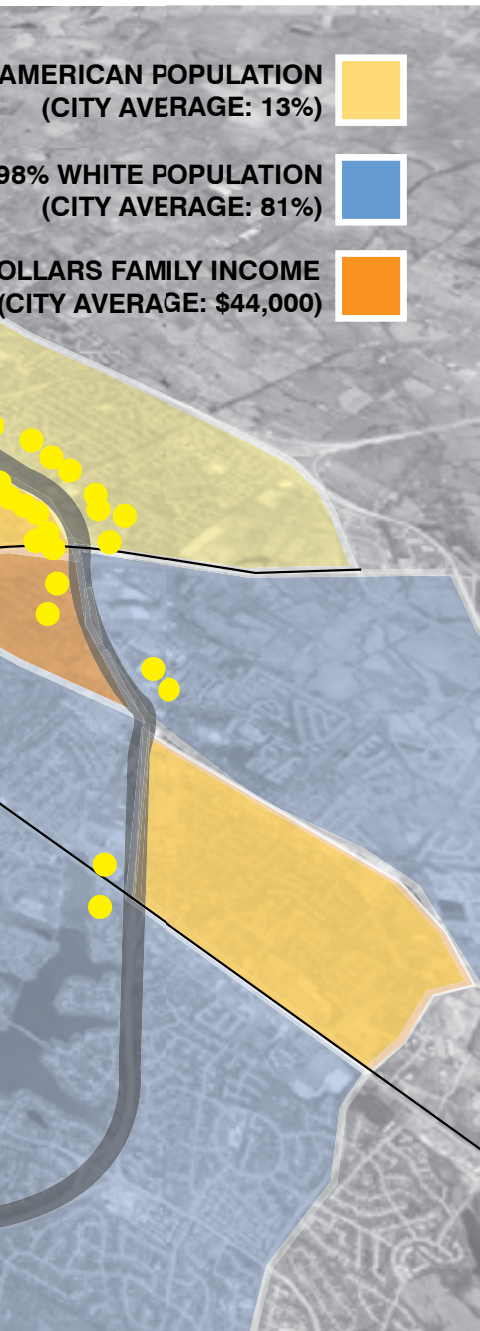
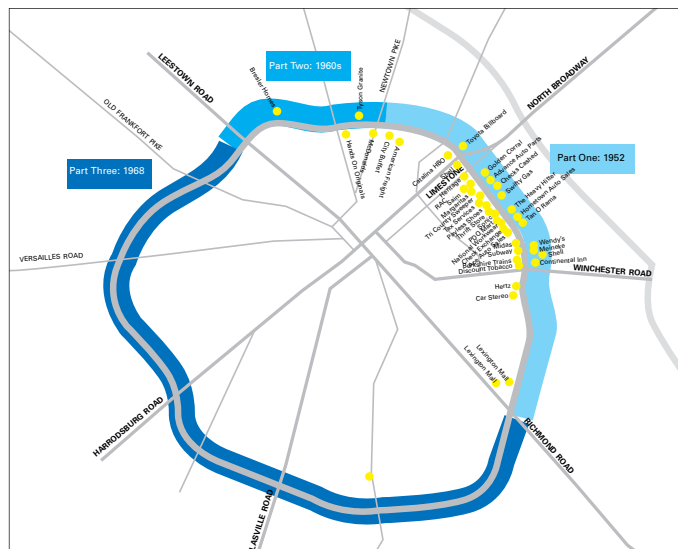


Figure 2 (left): The two qualities of New Circle Road.

Figure 3 (below): Map showing the relationship between yellow signage on New Circle Road and the phasing of the road's construction. Most yellow signs are located on the oldest part of the road.



Multi



Figures 4 & 5: Thoroughbred Park (top) was built by the Triangle Foundation, a private group of wealthy horse and businessmen, to further beautify Lexington. As a result, the park also masks the neighborhood behind it (bottom), Goodloe Town, the historically segregated area of the city. The Goodloe Town Neighborhood currently houses Lexington's highest African-American population. It is also the neighborhood with the greatest concentration of poverty.

The Northern side of the city is primarily lower-income, and mostly African-American (Kentucky was a border state during the Civil War and also legally segregated its African-American population until the late 1950's) while South Lexington is primarily white and affluent, and in proximity to a number of historic and geographically significant parks and sites. Yellow is conspicuously absent from the southern part of town, where Lexington's most recent growth has occurred (figures 4, 5). New shopping centers, town homes, and retail businesses are built with an entirely different signage: often serviced, recessed, gray, or maroon, the signs in South Lexington assume a level of subtlety and refinement. Little to no new development has occurred in the Northern half of the city. As a result, north Lexington remains in the public eye as the "problem area of the city," mostly poor, mostly black, where most crime is concentrated, and where most of the businesses aimed at addressing these social conditions are located. North Lexington is awash in yellow.

Why Yellow?

First are the obvious, practical reasons for choosing a yellow sign. It's a color with high visibility and clear legibility (yellow is the OSHA standard for "warning" and is the Federal Highway Administration's confirmed color—Pantone 116 is the preferred government hue—for "general warning"). In the context of selecting signage for a road designed and built in the 1950's, sign design decisions are motivated by the context of viewing the sign from the vantage of a car in stop-and-go traffic. The northern half of New Circle road is a cluttered landscape of sign architecture, a vestige of the era when

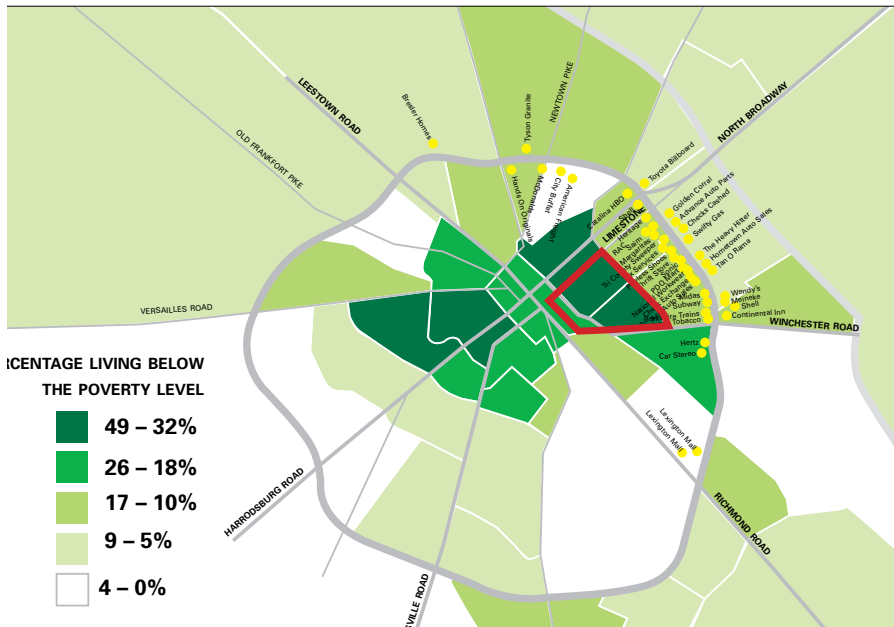
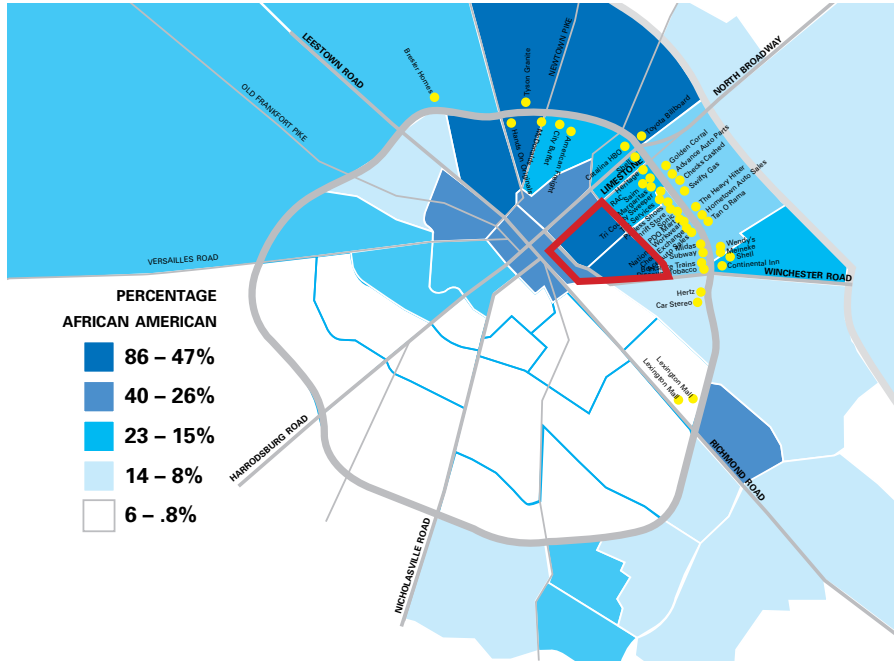


Figure 6 & 7: Mappings of race (above) and economics (below) and relations to yellow signage. The Goodloetown neighborhood is outlined in red. Maps made by the author, sourced from www.census.gov (see previous census map notation for full web source).

car-centric shopping was the future of urban design (figure 8). Recent urban developments rely on a fantasy of pedestrian-friendly environments and, as a result, their signage rejects this dream of walk-able cities viewed by foot: banners, awnings, smaller, hand-crafted signs are a sharp contrast to the large-scaled, speed driven signage of the 1950's and 60's when automobile attractions captured commercial imagination.

Most of the pawn shops, locksmiths, and check cashier businesses which use yellow signs are independently owned and operated, or are part of modest corporate structures, and have no formal branding strategy or sophisticated marketing department to make design choices. When the owners of Discount Tobacco need a sign, they head to a local sign company and heed the expertise of the person behind the counter. A yellow sign can be a more expensive choice, but the decision to catch an eye, along with the indisputable proof that yellow provides the great contrast and highest legibility, will push a store owner in favor of the more expensive, legible choice. In these situations, yellow is the branding strategy.

Where Yellow?

If yellow is so effective, then why aren't all independent businesses using yellow signage? Not everyone chooses a yellow sign - even pawn shops and tobacco brokers in "nicer" parts of the city, those without the high-traffic, treeless, stop and go qualities of 1950's New Circle Road, are not bright yellow but rather more understated blues, greens or greys. Despite the differences in site qualities, there are no color or content restrictions enforced by the Fayette County Planning and Zoning authority. In an interview with the building inspector in charge of signage, "there are no color mandates, only signage size and quantity regulations. There are many infractions on New Circle Road, but few complaints. The signage complaints come from [wealthier parts of

the city].” People aren’t deliberately complaining about yellow, they complain about too many visual distractions. More often than not these distractions are temporary signs designed to attract motorist’s attention, and leverage the highest contrast and legibility necessary. Inadvertently, yellow signs receive the complaints. Yellow signs are permitted in lower-income parts of the city, and are not tolerated in others.

Sharon Zukin writes in her essay,

Building a city depends on how people combine the traditional economic factors of land, labor, and capital. But it also depends on how they manipulate symbolic languages of exclusion and entitlement. The look and feel of cities reflects decisions about what—and who—should be visible and what should not, on concepts of order and disorder, and on uses of aesthetic power (138).

Certainly the owners of Discount Tobacco aren’t manipulating symbolic languages of exclusion when selecting a sign that will best attract attention to their business, but, in a sense, they are asserting the aesthetic power the public gives them. Fewer complaints about New Circle Road yields a sign design culture very different than the sign choices of Chevy Chase, a more affluent, 98% white part of the city. When yellow signs exist only in one part of the city, and only between certain roads, there is no question that the unintended visual signal of a massing of yellow signage is another way of relating class, race, and economics to the aesthetics of the city. Intentional or not, yellow is the default brand only for certain businesses when located in certain parts of the city.

We expect and allow yellow to be in lower-income areas. We tacitly agree yellow can exist on New Circle Road, and simply cannot tolerate its insertion into residential areas. As a society, Lexington has developed graphic mores which influences aesthetic decisions made by the pawn shop owners, the city building inspectors, and those who complain. It’s not that yellow signs are inherently racist: it’s that they indicate a belief about what parts of a cities are designed in which fashion. Who are our cities for? Where do certain projects, certain aspects of our lives “belong” when designing a city? The vestiges of

race / class separation remain visible in Lexington. These boundaries can be articulated through policy structures, census lines, zip codes, voting blocks, and they can be rendered physical in the city landscape by public parks, street names, or signage. Yellow Town is one of these results.

References

Hobgood, Patrick. "Constructing Community: an Exhibition of the Voices of Goodloetown,"

Kaleidoscope: University of Kentucky Journal of Undergraduate Scholarship, vol. 4 (2006), pp. 39–44.

Zukin, Sharon. "Whose Culture? Whose City?" *The Culture of Cities*. Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1995. 1–48.

US Department of Census: www.census.gov

Source information for this mapping: <http://factfinder.census.gov>

Kentucky Department of Transportation: <http://www.ktc.uky.edu>

Photography trips documenting yellow town, June 18, 2006, and March 23, 2007.

Interview with Patricia, at Signs Now. March 23, 2007.

Interview with Greg, Lexington Building Inspector, Signage. April 18, 2007.