



For more than 60 years, Teksign currently based in Mississauga, Ontario has developed signs large and small for customer around the world. In doing so, it has witnessed significant changes in technology, markets and clients.

Established by Fred Goddard as Technical Plastics in 1946, the company's name was soon shortened to Tek Plastics. In the early days, signs were just one of its areas of expertise. Tek distributed plastics and over the years produced, among other things, skylights, aerospace components, commercial lighting systems, gas station canopies and automotive components. It even built liquor carts and bun warmers in the late 1960s for Boeing DC-10 and 747 airplanes, because plastics reduced the weigh of these items.

Pioneering Plastic

Applying plastic manufacturing capabilities to the sign industry, Tek pioneered backlit signage as early as 1948. The company became especially well-known for national programs of gas station identification signs for clients like BP Oil, White Rose, Supertest Petroleum, Petrofina and British American oil, among others.

Most of these signs were double-sided, vacuum-formed acrylic with fluorescent lighting, which allowed the gas retailers' colourful logos to be faithfully reproduced in three dimensions and illuminated more brightly and reliably than with previous slimline systems.

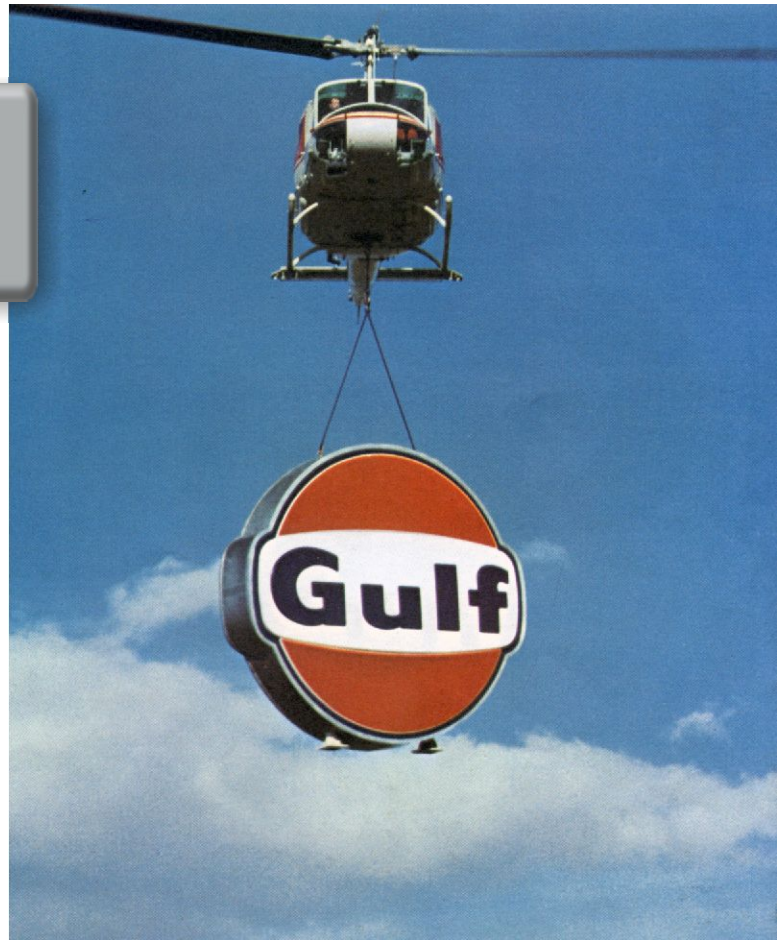
Continuous-cast acrylic was not available yet. The plastic sheets were purchased cut-to-size or prepared in Tek's factory.

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Change and Growth

In the midst of booming business with the gas station chains along with hotels, banks and retailers Goddard sold Tek Plastics in 1960 to Don Moffat, representing the Moffat appliance family. The company would change hands again in 1966, 1968 and finally 1976, when Owen Mullin took control. Today, his son Dan Mullin is president.

The company also moved in 1968 to its current location on Viscount Road in Mississauga, where it is one of two tenants sharing a 13,935-m² (150,000-sf) building. The move was prompted by major sign production contracts for Ford Canada and General Motors (GM) dealerships, which necessitated more manufacturing space.



Sign production continued to increase thereafter. By the late 1970s, the company then known more specifically as Tek Plastic Signs was one of the world's largest backlit plastic sign manufacturers.

Technology led the company to broaden the types of signs it built. In the late 1970s, for example, Tek partnered with Ferranti-Packard Electronics to build variable-message systems with magnetic flip disks, which were used at airports to direct pilots to various passenger gates and runways.

Inspired by this project, Tek built its first changeable electronic highway sign in 1983. Its initial contract was for 78 such signs along a New York freeway. This opened a new range of business for the company, with many more of the highway signs installed across the U.S., and the same technology was soon applied to price changers at gas stations.

As business became more international in nature, the company shortened its name to Teksign in 1987.

"Our engineering capabilities have given us an international reputation", says Doug Jackson, Director of Sales and Marketing, who sites such examples as a large Industrial Commerce Bank of China (ICBC) in Beijing, China, Dairy Queen signs in Dubai, U.A.E., and 60 Speedy Muffler locations in Germany. By 1994, Teksign had produced more than one million signs.



Tek plastics pioneered backlit signage following the Second World War



Handling Large Programs

Looking back, Teksign can be credited for helping make brands like Ford, Bank of Montreal, Midas and Scotiabank uniformly recognizable across Canada. Like the gas stations, these clients have represented national programs of illuminated primary identification signs.

The company's 7,804-m² (84,000-sf) manufacturing facility near Toronto's Pearson International Airport is home to computer-aided design/computer-aided manufacturing (CAD/CAM) systems. High-speed computer numeric control (CNC) routing tables, moulding presses, vinyl cutters and laminators, paint booths, a drying oven and a computerized extrusion cutter.

The manufacturing space is arranged accordingly. Lighter components are found around the perimeter, while heavier materials like steel are worked with in the centre. The array of manufacturing equipment has become one of the company's key differentiators in the market. With its moulding presses, for example, Teksign has some of the largest moulding capacity anywhere in North America for the production of plastic substrates.

The company's project managers use proprietary web-based software to specify and order materials, coordinate logistics, subcontract installations at each site, compile detailed production reports and encourage active participation with clients.



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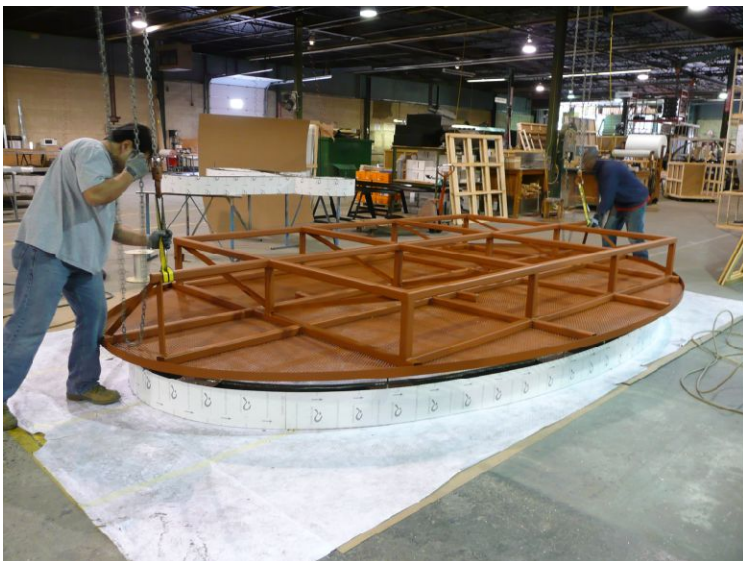
Revitalizing the Roundhouse

In addition to large sign programs, Teksign is known for custom work. One recent undertaking saw the company called upon to help a longtime national retail client, Leon's Furniture, alter its usual branding substantially for a one-off project. Toronto's John Street Roundhouse.

Located on Bremmer Boulevard across from the CN tower and the Rogers Centre stadium, is currently leased by the city to a dedicated development corporation, with the intention of revitalizing the former railway facility as a themed public park and museum. "Eventually, it will be a public park with vintage railway cars and a heritage museum, with the roundhouse's turntable fully functional again," Teksign's Doug Jackson explains. "Trains used to go into the service bays to be worked on and now those bay doors can be opened again."

To help pay for this development, the space also needs third-party tenants, such as Steam Whistle Brewing, which has been based at an eastern portion of the roundhouse for almost 10 years. Leon's expressed interest in the vacant western portion of the roundhouse, which would allow it a rare opportunity to establish a downtown Toronto location and experiment with a different retail concept from its suburban stores. The John Street Roundhouse Development Corporation welcomed this possibility, as Leon's could fill one large space that would otherwise have to be split up for smaller multiple tenants. "We liked the architecture," says Rod W. Fortune, national real estate manager for Leon's.

"It's smaller than most of our stores, but a beautiful environment to showcase furniture. We entered the lease. Now, a lot of people weren't crazy about a big-box store with bright yellow signs moving in. Also, the city had guidelines against attaching signage to a heritage building. So, we had to do something special, establishing a look that would work for us and the city."



"We negotiated with City Hall, as no commercial third-party signage was allowed in a public park," says Don Loucks, heritage architect at IBI Group, the primary design firm for the revitalization project.

"We had to find a way to get around that bylaw."

Subsequently, Teksign which had produced Leon's signs for decades was commissioned to design, manufacture and install identification signage that would meet the needs of the retailer, the property developer, the city's zoning department, the Toronto Railway Historical Association (TRHA) and the Toronto Railway Heritage Centre (TRHC).



Early on in the process, Teksign proposed a new design for the store's dimensional letters. In September 2007, a prototype of the letter 'e' was constructed to test this concept.

“While Leon's is known for its yellow backlit signs, we created samples from stainless steel instead,” says Jackson, “After prototyping, there were meetings and then we would redesign and resubmit. We worked successfully with everyone to gain their confidence that the design would compliment the environment while meeting our client's objectives.”

“At first we tried to go from lightboxes to individual illuminated steel letters,” says Fortune, “but the historical preservation group did not want the signage to be lit.” A lighting consultant suggested a compromise by using reflective stainless steel, which could be illuminated by external ambient sources, rather than from within.



The company continues to specialize in both custom signs (examples pictured left) and national programs for other clients

“Reflective stainless steel was first adopted for the park signage, but Leon's liked it, too,” says Loucks. “It was 'muscular', but modern. “The look didn't change too much from the mockup,” says Fortune, “and we ended up saving money by not having to illuminate the letters from inside.”

“The steel has a high-polish mirror surface that had to be handled with gloves when it was being transported and installed, but the letters will age gracefully, be washed well by the rain and require minimal maintenance,” says Jackson. “The reflections in the steel shift as you walk past the store and your perspective changes. So while it's not backlit, it's a spectacular in its own right, kind of look like an animated static sign.”



Three Leon's oval signs, each measuring approximately 3.4 x 5.8m (11 x 19-ft), were constructed for installation atop the roundhouse's 19.8-m (65-ft) tall coal and sanding tower, which itself would be illuminated by spotlights. Then, above the oval signs, 0.9-m (3-ft) cantilevered letters spelling out 'Roundhouse' would project from atop the tower. This plan was approved by all stakeholders.

“There are heritage artifacts we can light because they're important,” Loucks explains. “If a sign is there, it's lit because the artifact is lit.” The tower posed a number of challenges, however, as there were only limited structure fastening points and the new signs' support superstructure had to blend in visually with the 100-year old brickwork. “We had to design supports for inside the tower as the bricks themselves have no structural integrity,” says Debbie Scriver, a project manager at Teksign. “There were restrictions on what we could drill through.”



Toronto's John Street Roundhouse, formerly a railway facility, is being revitalized as a themed park and museum.

"Letters penetrating the shed would have been a problem," says Fortune. "So we used a perforated metal mesh to provide a uniform background and then had the signs project from the building, appearing to float in front of it. We used reverse-anchor details inside the shed that would not be visible to the public. It took a lot of work, but it achieved a classy sophisticated look and we got great light levels." The store's canopy, meanwhile, features dimensional entranceway signage that appears suspended from the steel and glass structure. Secondary letters were installed within the recess of the structural steel channel to spell out a new, distinctive slogan for Leon's: "Home Furnishings for Urban Spaces."



Cantilevered letters project from atop the roundhouse's coal and sanding tower.

"It's a non-traditional store with non-traditional signage," Jackson says. The architects at IBI Group also developed the concept for a 3.4 x 6-m (11 x 20-ft) free-standing pylon display, which Teksign engineered using 'I-beam' style supports consistent with the railway structures of the roundhouse's origins and light-emitting diode (LED) video screen to promote the museum. "The museum's organizers wanted the pylon sign with a screen, for which Teksign came up with a railway motif at ground level," says Fortune. "Then we at Leon's added our logo below the screen."

The new Leon's canopy features a customized slogan in keeping with its downtown Toronto locale.

"The screen on the pylon will show messages from TRHC when the museum opens, including high resolution footage of vintage trains," Jackson explains. This is expected to happen in early 2010. The Leon's store, meanwhile, opened on July 7, 2009, helping mark the retailer's 100th anniversary. "We had to operate in very tight confines to install the signs through late June and into early July to meet the deadline for the grand opening," says Jackson. "Until you get there to install, you don't fully know what you're working with. With a large number of contractors working in a relatively small space, we faced last-minute changes in both design and equipment deployment."



Lifting Leon's

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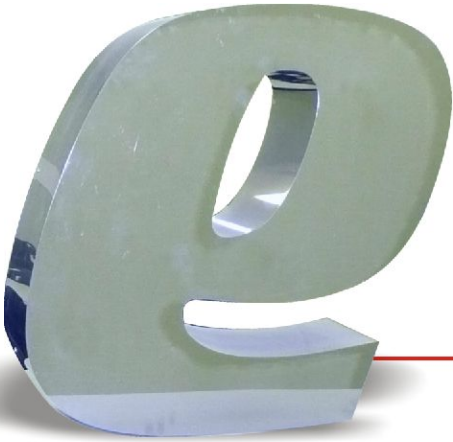
IBI Group Architects helped devise a sign arrangement that would satisfy all stakeholders in the Toronto Roundhouse project, including Leon's.



Southeast View



North View



Teksign built a prototype of the letter 'e' in Leon's to test the appearance of reflective stainless steel.

2

3

With their high-polished mirror surface, the stainless steel Leon's ovals had to be handled carefully during transportation.



Each oval was unpacked to be lifted by crane to the top of the coal and sanding tower.

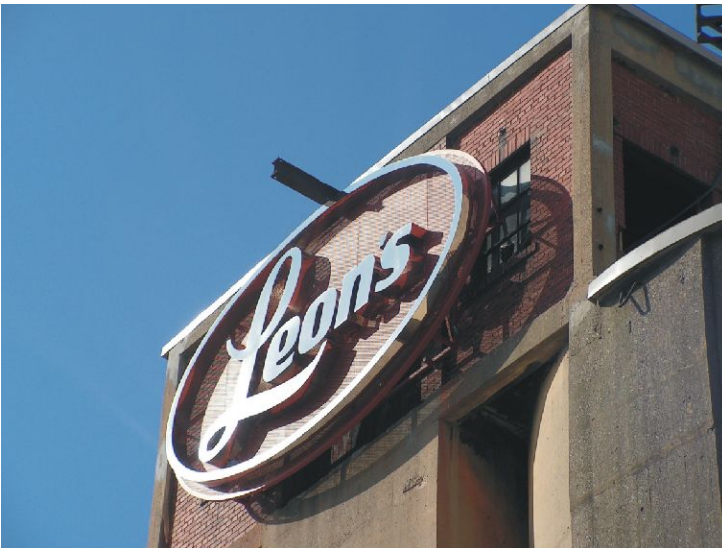
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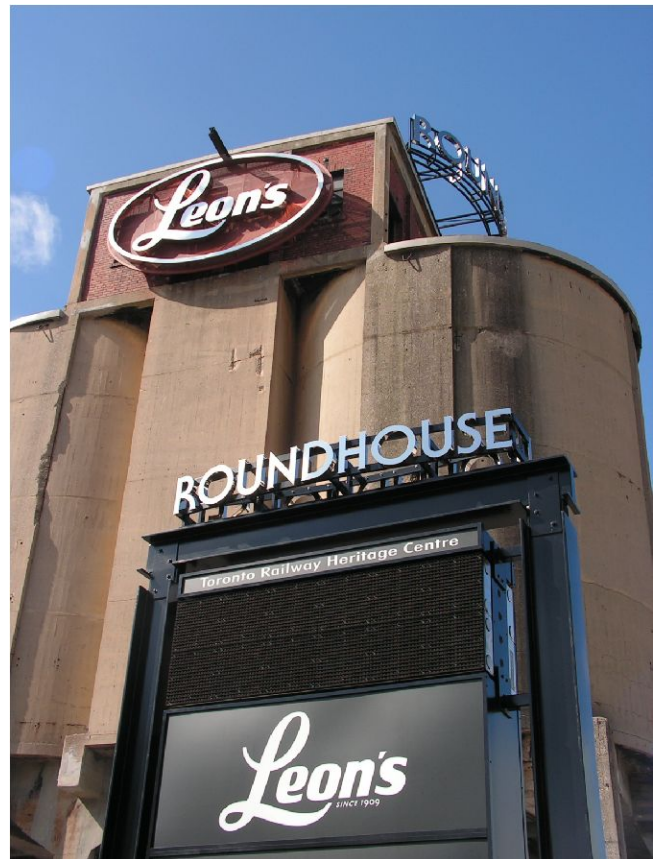
5 The installers also had to be lifted by crane, as the tower's own structure is not sufficient secure to safely support stairs or ladders.



6 Given the brick's lack of structural integrity, the signs had to project in front of them, with reverse-anchor details hidden inside the building.



7 On one side a projecting girder was granted heritage protection, so the sign installers had to work around it.



8 The ovals are now echoed by stainless steel letters and a Leon's logo on the pylon sign below.