

Bristol's Ode to Historic Hotpoint: A restored sign lights Bristol's streets

Santa visited historic downtown Bristol early this year — on May 11, one still-cool Friday night. Swapping his sleigh for a Bristol Fire Truck, he rode into 39 State Street in historic downtown to raucous applause, celebrating with Hotpoint Emporium, an artist co-op and retail store, as they unveiled the restoration of the historic Hotpoint sign.

Hotpoint is a manufacturer of domestic appliances — think washing machines, refrigerators and air conditioners. But Hotpoint Emporium, which included “Hotpoint” in the organization’s name because the gorgeous neon glass sign, had been a part of the building since the 1940s. To the co-op, it would have felt out-of-step to name the organization anything different. As one of the few remaining original neon Hotpoint signs in the country, to the Emporium it was a remnant of Bristol and American history still preserved. The humble sign was worthy of some much-needed love and upkeep.

If you were to drive by the store earlier this year, the sign would have been distinct and quietly graceful. The tall sign, a navy blue with a white lettering spelling out “Hotpoint” needed some polishing, and most crucially, it needed its lights repaired. The glass tubing needed to be completely reworked. The Emporium, which has lived and worked in the 39 State Street space for a year and a half, decided to form a committee to fix the sign. From there, efforts to restore the beloved sign took off. The artists teamed up with Dion Signs, a sign shop in Central Falls, for the repairs.

They began work in February, posting regular updates on their Facebook page and even establishing a GoFundMe page. Members of the Bristol community, Rhode Islanders at large, and even folks who have no connection to RI but who love signs, began contributing. The landlord Federal Properties of R.I., Inc. contributed \$5,000, and the community raised the rest, around \$4,600.

On that night on May 11, set up to show the unveiling of the newly restored sign, Santa flipped the switch, showing a vibrant neon-sign that gave State Street a reddish glow. To celebrate, hoards of community members came to celebrate, while munching on food and drink from local stores. There were even blue sugar cookies that spelled “Hotpoint” in white icing. Members of Hotpoint Emporium Ellen Blomgren, Chryssa Udvardy and Kol Naylor mentioned that many of them will now drive by State Street even if it is out of their way, just to catch a glimpse of the restored sign.

Although the restoration stayed mostly faithful to the original, the main difference is the base of the sign. Previously it read “Brunelli’s” at the bottom, for the one-time owner. Now it reads “02809,” Bristol’s ZIP code, dedicating the renovation to the town. The night of the unveiling was a particularly lively night for the usually quiet Bristol at that time of year. Community members lingered joyfully around State Street. The event must have been a hit: The Emporium, which once depended on spending from tourists, has reported a significant increase in the number of local shoppers who come into the store.

Walking into Hotpoint, which contains an array of art from different media, from jewelry to print, ceramic and more, one of the most striking features is a new necklace of theirs. They decided to make use of every part of the sign, even some of the bits of old glass that was removed from the original. And customers can now buy necklaces made with the original glass, ornamented with colorful accents like

beads and gemstones. Each necklace is unique, made with a specific piece of glass and a one-of-a-kind ornament. For an organization and a town that prides itself on community and historic preservation, this necklace seems fitting. It is wearable history, taking on a new life with each customer.