

I. Wayfinding in today's Interior Environments.

Peter Van Allen, SEGD
College Park, MD

January, 2003

A. Wayfinding literally means finding one's way...negotiating a series of pathways and arteries through incremental procedures until reaching the ultimate destination. The encounter between people of various backgrounds with formidable multi-building complexes can be daunting at best – maddening at worst. The wide range of culture, language, education level and job category's that compose the contemporary society guarantees serious wayfinding challenges in many of our institutions.

Human behavioral factors overlay architectural settings often designed with a myriad of visual cognitive elements. Disorientation and ill feelings can be expected. Proper building flow management demands attention to a hierarchy of wayfinding macro-schemes and the ultimate installation of specific signage components and other devices necessary to elevate the navigational skills of the potential wayfinder.

A.1 The principle entry threshold of a large institution serves as both a psychological and physical polymer space – a transfer from the exterior world to a new interior landscape. One's consciousness towards space changes with artificial horizons, lighting and a new sense of contained volumetric space. Building users (especially visitors) are sometimes confronted with security personnel and electronic screening devices. This encounter slows one's entrance into the building and, while now a commonplace and expected process, does add to one's level of distraction and disorientation.

A.2 The wayfinding process demands user participation and this engagement must be instilled by the directional (procedural experience) and orientation components (spatial

familiarization), at the very beginning of the user's journey. All wayfinders – whether executive, visitor or deliveryman – should “buy in” and understand the “graphic story” right away. Poorly executed sign structures or a band-aid approach to graphic collateral will reduce the legitimacy of the program, and thus, the potential user's full participation.

A.3 Both subtle and overt design ideas can promote the wayfinding scheme. Most obvious are sign components with arrows and verbiage combined to point-the-way, inform or give directional instruction (e.g. “proceed straight ahead to Auditorium”). Well-designed typographical layout and careful typeface selection are extremely important. A sign panel or structure can be beautifully designed and installed properly, yet not function correctly due to graphic design shortcomings. One of the most common errors in many of today's large institutions is to over crowd the message field with excess verbiage. More than four or six items of information at a given decision point typically becomes visual clutter and difficult to decipher. Figure-ground relationships, which is, the ratio of positive and negative space on dedicated display panels or other substrates dictate readability. The user must be able to infer useful information while editing non-meaningful data.

A.4 As mentioned above, covert or less obvious indicators of target locations and directions can be utilized in the wayfinding program. Examples are color coding of buildings, wings or departments; linear “feature bands” with color, typography or icons; concentrated placement of art pieces; floor carpet or tile decoration at traffic nodes; various treatments and differentiation of lighting intensity, etc.

B. If Mr. Smith, as a newcomer to the building, has arrived at the first major decision point – the Main Lobby – what does he do next? How is he to know if the master plan includes color-coding or naming of segments? How does he know which route is best to reach the ABC Department or even if that department is indeed, where he wants to be? A cryptic room number may have been previously given to Mr. Smith. Does it mean anything? The alpha / numeric characters seem useful (maybe) or are they really a hindrance to wayfinding? Do they imply some sort of systematic network?

This initial encounter with a large, open lobby setting containing various visible pathways and decision points is where he needs to be educated and made to feel at ease. Ideally, he should be able to grasp a basic “lay of the land” and understand quickly the overall concept of directional navigation in the context of this building (or building complex). Is it one building or many attached buildings? Does it stand-alone? On the other hand, are they connected and related to other buildings in a loose campus like atmosphere? How many floors are there – a few or is this a high rise? Where exactly are the elevators – which ones does he use? These, of course, are the vertical arteries / pathways and indeed function with their mini-lobby spaces as intermediate destinations or traffic nodes.

C. Typically, large high ceilings and the open plan lobby spaces, combined with layer upon layer of architectural feature and interior design nuance vie for visual attention. What item does he focus on? Which message display, portal, fixture or exhibit will capture his attention.

It behooves the design team to delineate and highlight general avenues and immediate destinations clearly in an uncluttered fashion.

Initial directories, displays or electronic kiosks can help with the education process. The attention span of hurried professionals or ancillary support personnel will be limited so all devices employed must be easily found (visually and physically).

C.1 Highly stylized static and electronic maps can help. These maps or stylized floor plans must be congruent with the actual building. (If facing north while reading the plan, then north must be at the top.) Focused color or structural detailing designed to complement the space but also cognitively accessible can be specified. Typography, lighting and placement should encourage one's participation – not thwart or overwhelm. The macro-scheme must permeate the various message boards and displays and should not overshadow the micro-scheme (i.e. immediate needs). Specific items of information and destinations must be clear, concise and carefully edited. Large laundry lists of departmental, utilitarian or personal name data are the enemy of good wayfinding systems. General information feeds down to increasingly specific data in a controlled hierarchy as one proceeds along the given path. Where institutional, organizational and personnel requests mandate more data than desirable, the designer must (after diligent editing) consider signage display tactics that break apart message groups or highlight some activities while downplaying others. The wayfinder (Mr. Smith) travels through a series of overt decision points, and data continues to be refined. General information becomes increasingly specific as he nears his target. (Keep in mind that this same system needs to work in reverse and return him to the lobby.) Throughout his journey, devices such as wall mounted floor plans or electronic directories can provide constant reinforcing of the overall building footprint and the particular wayfinding scheme being employed.

C.2 Color coding, wing naming, building ID, corridor announcement, number scheme emphasis, targeting of traffic nodes, highlighting of landmarks, feature bands, typographies, orientation maps, decision point dedication and display, art and plant coordination, overhead display, modular listings with dedicated items of information...many wayfinding devices are available to the wayfinding planners. All can be useful if designed and programmed correctly in context with their specific setting. Remember, well intentioned individual signage components or other targeted wayfinding elements can backfire (and be worse than having no system whatsoever) if not carefully coordinated and designed to compliment the entire scheme. Confused, irritated and lost personnel will result, negating the new system.

D. When selecting a “grand scheme” or master plan for wayfinding, the signage committee must carefully analyze crossover implications and budgetary considerations. For example, color-coding may seem ideal but existing structures and decor may prevent radical color change to certain areas. Likewise, a system based on room numbering may be bogged down in repetitive and confusing lists of awkward number sequences...very difficult to interpret effectively.

E. Many of today’s buildings and complexes use directional signs that are overwhelmed with detailed personnel and departmental text. Even well designed and handsome display units are many times chock-full of listing strips with names, titles and departmental data. In addition to contributing to a busy, cluttered wall treatment, the updating demands become enormous. Too many oft-changing variables require constant attention by the in-house signage department or building support staff.

Existing sign components can sometimes be reconfigured easily with changed overlays or alternate components containing fewer items-of-information. Creative retrofitting can save money and often result in an effective and economical wayfinding program.

F. Electronic touch-screen directories can be very useful, easily updated tools that may be incorporated in the overall master plan. Personnel, departmental and other name / title databases can be quickly accessible along with maps and wayfinding printouts. In addition to units typically located in the lobby areas, auxiliary kiosks or wall-mounted screens may be considered for other highly trafficked areas.

Whichever signage / wayfinding master plan is ultimately selected; the wayfinding team / signage committee must strongly consider future needs and changeability when designing and specifying. As indicated previously, certain existing substrates and display modules could be reconfigured to accommodate a new system and improve function. This technique saves money and maintains aesthetic coordination and continuity with established architectural precepts.

G. In conclusion, the final system will be asked to quickly educate, orient and incrementally lead the wayfinder through his journey as simply and efficiently as possible. Overly complicated systems and displays will not help; indeed just the opposite is most likely to occur. With careful planning, the system can be intellectually useful, environmentally pleasing and readily acceptable to updating and modifications. The user population will navigate the institution with confidence and infer a sense of organizational skill on the part of the owner / manager. The wayfinding program thus becomes a symbol of the institutional “consciousness” and mission as well as an integrated design system.