Wayfinding: Human Perceptions & Orientation; in the Built Environment
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"Unfamiliar environments make special demands upon us. Even the simplest of settings can involve a jumble of information that has to be sorted and processed before it becomes meaningful" (Pollet, p. 3).

Wayfinding is essential in today's society. Imagine a world where there were no signs or indications of where one thing ended and another began? We rely on visual cues in the environment to not only tell us where we are, how to get where we want to be, but also when we get there. Architects and designers face unique challenges in combining visual guidance with their designs. Understanding what wayfinding or spatial orientation is, is essential to incorporating it into the built environment.

HISTORY Man has always relied on a sense of direction" and the ability to move from one place to another, and as a matter of fact, being good at this has meant life or death. Think of primitive man or even indigenous populations living today in remote regions where water and food is sometimes scarce and they must constantly move.

- Use of mazes
- Ability and importance to orient oneself to the environment
- Perceiving visual cues

Visual cues can include a variety of things. The most obvious are signs. Others include architectural elements such as stairs, elevators, lobbies, and corridors. Interior treatments can include the change of wall color, type and texture, changes of flooring, innovative uses of lighting technique to highlight or minimize certain areas, ceiling treatments and furniture arrangements. While these elements are most commonly used in creating aesthetically pleasing structures and environments, some thought should be given to using them in order to aid wayfinding, and make the environment more friendly to its intended users. Perhaps many architects and designers feel that "cluttering" their spaces with graphic signs do not allow for good design, but in most cases, it cannot be argued that architectural elements cannot be used alone to guide one successfully through a space, especially when considering large public access spaces such as hospitals, airports, museums, and municipal buildings. Perhaps the most important thing I learned from doing this research is that understanding the nature of signs, how humans perceive them, and how important they can be to creating a successful environment, is an important aspect to design.

IMPORTANT THINGS TO CONSIDER:

- Use a visual guidance system to ensure successful use of the space by the user
- Use architectural elements and interior treatments whenever possible
- Signs should be placed at decision making areas (entrance, lobby, elevators, corridor intersections, etc.
- Choose appropriate signs for the main group of users (children, elderly, visually impaired, etc.)
- Graphics should be legible, direct to the point, and visible from a reasonable distance
- Graphics should be designed and placed consistently throughout the space (think of standardized traffic, road, and highway signs, apply to informational directional, prohibitive, and instructional signs)
- Avoid creating visual clutter (use signs for only the most important information, otherwise too many signs become "invisible" to the eye and useless.
- Choose visual guidance and orientation devices which are compatible with and a part of your design concept.

References

- *Wayfinding in Architecture.* Romedi Passini. Van Nostrand Reinhold, New York, New York, 1992.

  Probably the best of the few books published on the concept of wayfinding. Easy to read and understand, this book covers the most important aspects to wayfinding and how humans perceive their environments and react to them.

- *Sign Systems for Libraries: Solving the Wayfinding Problem.* Dorothy Pollet and Peter C. Haskell. R.R. Bowker Company, New York, New York, 1979.

  While this book deals with libraries specifically, excellent general information is also provided. It is a unique and comprehensive look at wayfinding solutions from start to finish.

- *Perception & Lighting as Formgivers in Architecture.* William M.C. Lam, edited by Christopher Hugh Ripman. Van Nostrand Reinhold, New York, New York, 1992.

  This is a wonderfully written book which concentrates on human perception of the environment (both physical and psychological), and the use of lighting to help define the spaces we live, work and travel in. This book does discuss the specific issues of wayfinding.

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