Wayfinding: Are We There Yet?

WHETHER IT IS A DETAILED MAP BRINGING A VISTA OF THE LOCAL SHOPPING CENTER, OR NAVIGATIONAL SYMBOLS & COLOURS DIRECTING IN A VAST HEALTHCARE FACILITY OR THE MULTI-LEVEL METRO INTERCHANGE STATION, WAYFINDING CUES EXIST ALL AROUND, OFFERING COMFORT, SOLACE AND THE RIGHT DIRECTION.

Vinisha Halli – Lead Designer, Service & Experience Design has found out some clues to make future easy

Descending from ancestors who found their way by following the stars, and centuries later, after many different navigational methods including the wind and the sun, we humans should have been seasoned navigators. The truth however is, anything but that. We still get lost. We still intuitively look for direction. We are all a little too familiar with that feeling of being lost in a new space or even a familiar old one, caught in the middle of nowhere with not a recognisable landmark or a soul in sight. Spotting a signboard with the logo of your favourite retailer or a working internet connection for directions to the nearest restaurant can surely be reassuring during such times. All thanks to signs and wayfinding and how the human brain is conditioned to find comfort and reassurance in familiarity.

What is wayfinding?

"Wayfinding refers to information systems that guide people through a physical environment and enhance their understanding and experience of the space." Wayfinding encompasses the ways in which people orient themselves in a physical space and navigate from place to place.

Humans have come to rely on wayfinding, often without consciously realising that it is a part of their everyday environment. Whether it is a detailed map that offers a vista of your local shopping center, or navigational symbols and colours that direct you in a vast healthcare facility or the stressful multi-level metro interchange station, wayfinding cues exist all around, offering comfort, solace and the right direction.

Wayfinding goes far back, way before the expert navigational accomplice on your smartphone which helped you find your way around new cities. When done right, it not just helps people traverse through spaces and cities efficiently, but it even improves spatial awareness among residents, keeps them in tune with the official public place terminologies coined by local authorities rather than random landmarks. It even builds an association with the space and creates social markers where you can easily meet and greet one another.

Different Kinds of Wayfinding and Their Usage

Wayfinding, at an elementary level, can be thought of as a layer of information that

assists people in steering and exploring cities, museums, theatres, galleries, hospitals, academic institutions, transit stations and other complex spaces. Wayfinding messages are designed to be reliable, concise and legible; more so in places where people are likely to be frantically trying to find their way around a building in high-stress situations, and easy decision-making can greatly alleviate such tense situations.

In urban settings, wayfinding designers develop signage and information systems for both pedestrians and motorists, where each have unique challenges like navigating streets and roadways. These information systems help people develop "mental maps" of the terrain and simplify their routes to the extent possible. Here signage also helps create an identity of the urban area and location markers in public spaces.

Complex and high stress environments like Healthcare facilities and large campuses present a unique set of navigational challenges. Often, these environments have developed over time and encompass multiple buildings. This makes navigation among the buildings complex. Also, these spaces have multiple functions and usages. Wayfinding systems can help make navigation easy, stress free and memorable even by providing easy-to-follow signage and directions to their destinations with some striking designs. In some settings, reliance on text-based messaging is minimized and systems rely heavily on non-text cues such as colours, symbols and shapes.

In transportation settings such as airports, travellers need information to guide them from the roadway to the airport and through the terminal complex. Here, these systems provide directional guidance through a carefully planned sequence that delivers information to users at key decision points in their journey. Wayfinding also helps the authorities keep the flow of people directed and also make people aware of the many amenities that these places have to offer. Emergency and Statutory signage forms a very important aspect in these environments.

Comprehensive wayfinding systems often combine multiple methods of multisensoral ques like signage, maps, symbols, colors, sound, textures, and other communications. Increasingly, they integrate mobile applications, digital displays, RFID, and other wireless technologies. Along with all these tools, understanding the people using the space and what the space stands for, holds the key to designing a comprehensive yet simple and coherent wayfinding system.

Wayfinding - A Narrative Experience

From all the definitions we have read so far we know that Wayfinding helps you find your way. It guides you through a physical environment to help enhance the understanding of it and thereby experience it better. However, looking at this in a larger perspective, wayfinding helps tell a story. It adds another layer to the space. Wayfinding can be used to create experiences as intended by the curator/ designer/owner of the space. As a designer, when we design spaces and information systems for them, we find ourselves in a unique position to tell the unspoken stories that the spaces were meant to tell. Our opportunities range from enhancing the brand of a tech park to creating smooth navigation in complex environments like airports and metros. We sometimes also get the chance to let the users be lost in museums or galleries. In other narrative environments, we can just provide visual clues to help tell the story. Wayfinding allows to activate spaces, provide multi-layered information, create narrative experiences, allowing users to wander, not waste their time, make them utilise the architecture in the best way possible way (e.g. Pompidou centre), and finally adds value.

We find that we are able to create another layer to the existing ambience that provides clarity, comfort and in some cases, a narrative. The power to tell stories with wayfinding is often underestimated. We designers require to understand the users, the space, the context and what is it that owners of the space intend for the users to experience. It is also imperative to have an understanding of the navigation skills and habits of the users today to develop the right wayfinding plan for all spaces from unfamiliarly large cities to the comfort of your office spaces and neighbourhood malls.

Wayfinding - The Way to a Better Future

Modern wayfinding tools can also be designed to go above and beyond what their traditional counterparts had to offer, making cities smarter and more efficient. Wayfinding can pave the easy and efficient way to manage the spaces and cityscapes of tomorrow.

With increasing innovation in today's wayfinding and signage, brands, businesses and institutions are increasingly expanding their domain and developing newer and more innovative ways to communicate their message. The signage that they host, are responsible for clearly conveying what the brand/organisation stands for, how it should be perceived and what is the message it represents. Using the right technology to create signages - both static and digital as well as the to make the interaction experience seamless and comprehensive for customers is essential for higher levels of brand recall and association leading to the overall development of a brand's identity. Additionally, innovative approaches in wayfinding also contribute to the increased focus of the government on developing better cities and smart living solutions for which signage and wayfinding is inevitable.

Over the centuries, like everything else, the tools have changed but the essence remains the same. The core idea of helping users find their way and create a better experience for them is still the essence of wayfinding systems across various spaces and cities.

So, the next time you find yourself lost, look for that sign. (Pun intended.)

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About the Author:

Vinisha Halli is an award-winning designer with over a decade experience in creating experiences for people. She is an architect and a visual designer by profession and has worked on projects that include customer experiences across various domains. This includes multiple media like physical environments and intangible concepts, interior design and architecture, wayfinding and signage for transport environments, institutions, tech parks, etc.

Vinisha has been associated with Tata Elxsi for over seven years. During her stint, she has spearheaded several key projects and worked with both international and Indian clients like Kochi Metro, Tata Steel, Mumbai International Airport, GE, among others.

She believes that narrative experiences for people are like telling stories. Everyone connects with stories. Hearing, seeing, living and sharing them adds a lot of value to people's lives, and designers are in a unique position to enable them.

Vinisha has done her Masters in Visual Design from Scoula Politecnica di Design from Milan, Italy and B. Arch from R. V. College of Engineering, Bangalore.

Kochi Metro: Signage Design for Transit Environments in alignment with the brand

Mobility projects in India give more emphasis on infrastructure while aspects like improving service quality, accessibility, customer perception are often missed out or designed as after thoughts.

To enhance the quality of life of citizens of Kochi and provide an integrated transport system connecting metro, water bus, bus, taxi and cycle, Tata Elxsi helped KMRL to translate their vision to reality. We helped KMRL to shift gears from a traditional transport infrastructure implementation model to one that focuses on user focused services and an integrated travel experience.

Tata Elxsi designed the Brand Strategy and Passenger / Service experience based on the guiding theme 'Connect to Prosper' across all customer facing elements of metro system. The brand strategy and positioning with a new identity were developed jointly in association with our partner Brash Brands. To offer the commuters of Kochi a seamless connected experience, theme based station interiors, distinct colour schemes, unique kochi metro app, wayfinding & information design, illustrated train livery were designed to reflect the heritage and spirit of Kochi.

Reimagining tomorrow's metro travel experience, Tata Elxsi is also assisting KMRL team for evaluation and assessment of design implementation for Brand and Customer Experience solutions. We are glad to see the KMRL's ambition of turning Kochi to a smart city come to life and Tata Elxsi team is proud to play an important role in this transformation.

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Tata Steel Plant, Kalinganagar, Orissa: Urban Environment Signage

Tata Steel Plant in Kalinganagr, Odisha is a state-of-the-art Steel Plant. Equipped with the most modern technologies, the plant delivers enhanced productivity with minimal environmental impact and will enable us to cater to new and promising market segments including Oil and Gas, Lifting & Excavation and Defence.

In an area that spans 1700 acres of this plant, Tata Elxsi had the opportunity to create a unique identity of the signage, which would help the many users of the plant navigate through it. The plant is designed like a township and wayfinding was of utmost importance.

The wayfinding and signage design was inspired from the steel plant and was soaked in context. Various different sign types were designed for the maps, directions, statutory, mandatory and prohibition information, names of buildings and structures and other information to be communicated to the users. All the signs were designed with steel pipes bent to shapes to accommodate the information, making them look like a stylised part of the environment.