



AIA Best Practices: Wayfinding signage points you in the right direction

Contributed by Ignacio Catral

Summary

Incorporating signage discussions into the early stages of the programming and design process can affect both the design integrity and proper function of a building environment. Addressing signage on the front end of the project with strategic, design-oriented thinking results in a signage system that makes sense.

Visitor experience

A visit to a new environment is an unfamiliar experience. While aesthetic appeal and numerous other factors and conditions shape this experience, the subtle communication provided by wayfinding contributes significantly to the visitor's overall impression of the environment.

Wayfinding relates to knowing where you are and where you are headed; it gives you recognizable cues. It helps you determine the best route in which to quickly and easily navigate to your destination—and then find your way back again.

Intuitive, straightforward signage can prevent the frustration and dissatisfaction of being lost and disoriented. This signage, often an afterthought in the design process, does not always get the attention it deserves. Due to its impact on visitor satisfaction, planning for wayfinding can greatly affect how people experience a new environment.

Forethoughts vs. Afterthoughts

In the preliminary planning, when functionality and creating a logistic and accessible space plan are addressed, why is signage sometimes an afterthought? Architects and designers, intimately familiar with how a newly designed building will function, may take wayfinding for granted.

Including signage in the preliminary design phases ensures that it is appropriately integrated into the budget and properly positioned throughout the space. Budget constraints on the back end cause many companies to turn to signage production houses to fulfill the signage requirements of the project. This seems like a cost-effective solution initially because design fees are low or nonexistent. However, quality is often sacrificed. These production houses are sales-driven organizations that typically make their money based on the quantity of signage—a focus that can result in a space smattered with unnecessary amounts of low-quality signage.

Working with a signage consultant who understands the design process, the importance of wayfinding, and the need to create signs that complement the design aesthetic can create a better experience for the end user.

Consultants who understand circulation patterns and the design intent can help create a high-quality signage plan. These experts know that fewer signs, appropriately placed, can provide better wayfinding and maintain the architectural integrity of the building.

To avoid compromising the end product (without any reduction in cost), signage should be addressed at the start of a project as a percentage of the construction cost.

While costs can vary based on the quality of materials, 5 to 7 % of the buildout cost is realistic, including the design and construction of the signage.

Signage considerations

Signage planning requires thought about wayfinding and branding. When visitors reach intersection points in the building, how do you present directional choices? Human nature requires that these needs be addressed. Have you given people clear choices? Have you presented these choices in a format that is consistent with the architecture and brand of the building?

An overall action plan is important to address these considerations. Failure to create a comprehensive wayfinding plan is a mistake in the project process. A short list of technical and other considerations in your wayfinding action plan should include:

- Appropriate type of installation for the project and each sign condition
- Space functionality
- Proper Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance
- Character size ratios
- An understanding of the architect's design intent. The signage design should take note of architectural details to create a cohesive look and remain "on brand," and it should not stand out too much. It should blend with the architectural concept and be consistent to support the brand identity of the building.

Once a direction for signage is established, it is critical to develop a master signage standards manual that addresses all types of signage to be used in the building, with specifications for all anticipated scenarios. To maintain consistency and control, a facility contact person should be designated as an extension of the signage program. It is also important to assess the signage program early in the life of the building; the signage should be evaluated to ensure it supports the occupants and users of the facility. Planning and measures such as these will prevent future inconsistencies and provide a standard by which to enforce signage criteria.

Serious about signage

Signage holds both utilitarian and aesthetic properties, and it should not be overlooked in the design process. Working with a firm that understands interior design as well as graphic design ensures that the signage will be part of the overall experience. It will be customized to suit the project rather than regurgitating an old design in a new color.

Signage design should be approached like all design disciplines, with programming and results that achieve goals. Addressing signage on the front end of the project with strategic, design-oriented thinking results in a signage system that makes sense. More is not always better, and signage on the back end may lead you and your clients in the wrong direction.

About the contributor

Ignacio Catral is a co-founder and principal of [Catral Doyle](#) creative company, in Milwaukee. A native of Madrid, Spain, he graduated from Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design with an emphasis on interior design. Catral started his career with a large Milwaukee architecture firm before forming Catral Doyle, which combines experience in both three-dimensional design and visual communications to offer an integrated range of advertising and branding services. The firm often acts as a liaison between signage manufacturers and architects.

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