

Wayfinding

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A simple, organized and unified system of graphical signage, maps and navigational tools is essential for creating safe, active and healthy streets and neighbourhoods. This guide suggests wayfinding **tactics to consider for age-friendly communities.**

What is Wayfinding?

Coined in 1960 by Kevin Lynch, wayfinding refers to the “consistent use and organization of definite sensory cues from the external environment” (Lynch 1960 p. 3). Wayfinding systems find “order in chaos without destroying character” and let people know “how to reach their destination, where they are, what is happening there, and how to exit” (Gibson 2009 p. 13).

Why is it Important?

According to Lynch:

“Wayfinding systems find order in chaos”

“To become completely lost is perhaps a rather rare experience for most people... We are supported by the presence of others and by special wayfinding devices: maps, street numbers, route signs, bus placards. But let the mishap of disorientation once occur, and the sense of anxiety and even terror that accompanies it reveals to us how closely it is linked to our sense of balance and well-being” (1960 p. 4).

This sense of disorientation and stress is even more significant for older adults with “reduced sensory capacity” such as vision loss, hearing loss, reduced recognition, reaction times, orientation and memory, as well as physical limitations (Carman & Fox 2008). **Dementia**, for example, reduces the ability for people to successfully navigate the outdoor environment, and concerns about wandering away from home are often cited as a reason for institutionalization in care homes (Sheehan 2006 p.271). In order to carry out an independent lifestyle, people need to be able to engage in activity outside the home, and wayfinding can assist those with dementia in recognizing familiar spaces and places.

Considerations regarding height, size, typography, colour, materials, imagery and placement must be made in order to create a successful wayfinding strategy for older adults. Ultimately, good wayfinding supports walkability, allowing “people to navigate destinations in a secure and comfortable manner” (Carman & Fox 2008).



Photo Credit: Spontaneous Interventions Wall, Raleigh



Photo Credit: Smashing Magazine

Figure 1: Confusing, cluttered signage can cause disorientation and stress in older adults



Image Credit: Formmedia.ca

Figure 2: Directional wayfinding for Dieppe, New Brunswick

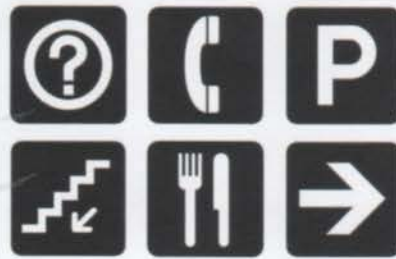


Image Credit: AIGA

Figure 3: Some commonly used AIGA/DOT symbols

How Does it Work?

Outdoor wayfinding consists of several types of signage: identification, directional (*Figure 2*), orientational and regulatory (Gibson 2009 p. 43). According to Susan Hunter (2010), “**wayfinding should be designed for the first time visitor** because repeat visitors can use their past experiences for navigation (as cited in Lynch 1960). It is important to consider that not everyone experiences or remembers an environment the same way, and that wayfinding should be helpful and accessible for everyone.

Design Considerations

Language and Imagery: Wayfinding signage should adhere to local **universal accessibility standards**. According to the City of Winnipeg Access Design Standards (2010), signage should be simple, uncluttered, and use language that is plain enough for those with limited literacy levels. **Icons and symbols** “provide a shorthand pictorial representation of a place, a service, or an action” (Gibson 2009 p. 96) and should be “based on a set of recognized elements” (Arthur & Passini 1991 p. 69). *Figure 3* shows a set of standard AIGA/DOT symbols.

Size: Arthur and Passini (1991) suggest that a standard **legibility** distance is 50-feet-per-inch – a one-inch (25 mm) letter can be seen from 50 feet (15m) away; a 4-inch (100mm) letter from 200 feet (60m), for example.

Typography: **Simple bold sans-serif typefaces** (such as Helvetica) should be used, and lower-case letters should be avoided as they can be easily confused with other letters (Arthur & Passini 1991 p. 163)

Colour and Material: Signage should have a strong **colour contrast** between type and background to make it easy to read (*Figure 4*). While colour coding can be a useful navigational technique, it does not always consider those with colour-blindness. Material choices should consider glare from artificial and natural lighting (Carreon 2000 p.109) – **matte finishes** are often the most effective.

Height: Signage should be at **eye-level**, and placed so it does not obstruct walking paths, sidewalks and entrances.

“Wayfinding should be helpful and accessible for everyone”



Figure 4: A combination of simple language and icons, sans-serif font and strong colour contrast make this park sign easy to use

Figure 5:
Tactile map
assist those
with visual
impairments



Alternative Wayfinding Strategies

Landmarks: Identifying existing landmarks can be a good first step in the wayfinding design process, especially in smaller, or rural centres. According to Susan Hunter (2010), women rely on landmarks for wayfinding more than men, and dementia research has shown that “older people use landmark strategies in wayfinding” (Sheehan 2006 p. 279). Landmarks are a good starting point for recognizing locations for signage, as they help form strong “mental pictures” (Lynch 1960 p. 4). Additionally, they are tied to the identity of a community, especially for long-term or lifelong residents. Smaller communities may also consider creating regional wayfinding systems with other towns in near proximity as welcome signs and landmark markers are also a effective branding and tourism tool for an entire region.

Electronic Options: LED displays, interactive kiosks and GPS enabled mobile applications are more recent and flexible methods that allow information and maps to be changed quickly. Many personal electronic devices also have accessibility feature for those with physical limitations.

Visual Impairment: Audible signals at crosswalks not only assist at intersections but also “serve as effective landmarks, or sound beacons” (Carreon 2000 p. 106). Braille, raised letters and tactile maps (Figure 5) are also effective tools. Heamchand (2010) discusses recent

technology where users can enter a destination and have a braille printed map sent to them.

Guerilla Wayfinding: Walkyourcity.org allows users to create and print simple walking distance signs. This inexpensive, unsanctioned self-wayfinding program encourages communities to think about walkability in a creative way.

Walking Maps: New York and London have introduced new street maps that not only state ‘you are here’, but also how many minutes it will take to walk to important landmarks. (Figure 6)

Final Thoughts

The most important consideration for an age-friendly wayfinding system is visual consistency. This is not only for aesthetic quality, but to ensure that navigating the space is logical, easy, clear, dependable and comfortable for all.

“Landmarks are
tied to the identity
of a community”



Figure 6: WalkNYC maps showing
walking time to nearest landmarks

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