Book Review:

Library Signage and Wayfinding Design: Communicating Effectively with Your Users
by Mark Aaron Polger

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There have been a large number of wayfinding publications over the last 15 years. These books tend to fall into three types:

Wayfinding Design: Books that focus on the intersection of the wayfinding discipline with the design process. These books are meant to appeal primarily to design students and a professional design audience. Books in this camp use visual best practices to illustrate successful methodologies. These books include *Wayfinding* by Craig Berger (The author of this review) and *The Wayfinding Handbook: Information Design for Public Places* by David Gibson.

Wayfinding Research: Compilations and overviews of wayfinding research and its impact on design metrics and principals. The books try to avoid subjective extrapolation to focus on cognitive research methodologies. The most well know research in this area are the publications of the United States Sign Council and the Sign Research Foundation.

Wayfinding Planning: These books are a hybrid. They provide a research overview as a foundation for practical recommendations and design practices. These books employ current design and planning examples to exemplify both research results and deep-seated processes. Examples of these books include *Signage and Wayfinding Design* by Chris Calori and *People, Signs and Architecture* by Paul Arthur and Romedi Passini.

All three types of books are important to the academic and professional world of wayfinding and sign design. Successful books may accent research, processes and design practices at different levels, but they all acknowledge that these three areas are important to understand the breadth of the field.

This brings us to *Library Signage and Wayfinding Design* by Mark Aaron Polger, a book that falls firmly in the hybrid camp, combining deep contextual research, a clear articulation of design processes and design approaches that support these practices. The book largely succeeds in the first two areas, providing clear guidance and methodologies for wayfinding development, while falling somewhat short in the design practice area. Neglecting the third area prevents the book from reaching its full potential, a marriage of the deep well of cognitive research, exemplary processes, and the alchemy that designers provide when applying these approaches in places and spaces.

The successes of the book begin with laying down a clear foundation of wayfinding research before delving into the specifics of wayfinding for libraries. The author provides an extensive overview of the most recent research practices from ethnographic methodologies to observational approaches like eye tracking. The author also lays out a foundation in existing research in wayfinding in signs, typography, and library navigation before beginning the specifics of planning methodology. This approach is well documented, and all the sources are relevant. Even for practitioners in the field this basic overview is useful and establishes a credible benchmark for the focus areas in the book.

Throughout the book there are illustrations that support these foundations, and they are all very clear and comprehensible. While as a design professor and writer of design books I may have issue with the design quality of some of these examples, they do illustrate the academic underpinnings of legibility and cognition. The before and after pictures also provide strong illustrations of the impact of these underpinnings in real life.

The book then delves into the planning stage with illustrated examples of sign audits and recommendations. This section is granular in detail, showing specific library issues and problems with existing signs and how audit and design teams resolved these problems. Some of the visual examples are excellent as well, showing how even the most basic recommendations founded on cognitive research yields impressive results for legibility and an overall understanding of navigation.

An important part of the audit stage is how the audit process itself is treated as a professional area that combines planning, management, design and technology issues. Very few books delve into the nuts and bolts of the auditing process, and particularly management and visitor analysis. However, this section has some difficulties illustrating the balance between wayfinding and place. The best example in the section, the Malcolm E. Love Library, at San Diego State University, focuses on the specific improvements (high contrast signs), but not the specific architectural and placemaking issues that define how the space will be navigated. This is a section that perhaps could have also explored similar institutions to libraries with navigational issues. Issues like illumination, identification and mapping are more universal. Sharing pertinent examples from healthcare and education could illustrate the collision of wayfinding methodologies with placemaking. Healthcare is an area where there has been extensive experimentation in many of the wayfinding solutions found in the book. The book could also have explored the reverse, where excellent wayfinding practices in libraries could be a model for other facility types.

Another element that would have made the book more effective would be isolating design issues such as the use of typography and color, and providing more detail. The book does get to the fundamentals of these issues, but a little more depth would be helpful, particularly when delving into some of the more specific topics like nomenclature.

The book correctly goes in-depth into digital content and the user experience as part of the larger wayfinding environment. The exploration of technical software specifications along with content management is excellent and provides the reader with a comprehensive view of the field. Strangely though, while this section is among the most in-depth in the book it does not provide as many visual examples. This may partly be because of the newness of the field, but as mentioned before, examples from other types of facilities could fill in, particularly with more universal areas like maps and search programs.

An additional important wayfinding element that could have played a role in the book is the architecture of the buildings. Unlike most other institutional buildings modern libraries vary dramatically in architectural approach

Figure 1 /

Vancouver Community Library by Mayer Reed is an excellent example of how library wayfinding signage can serve as a model for other institutions.

and are often considered by cities and universities as "trophy buildings." They also often organize space in creative and unique ways including reading areas, specialty book sections, and areas for display. A review of some different building approaches, particularly with newer buildings, would provide extra depth.

As with other treatments of planning and design methodology, this book really shines when articulating the best practices of various libraries. These practices range from design guidelines to the use of digital signage. For planners or designers engaged in related projects these explicit recommendations from built facilities are highly effective, particularly when many views can be applied in a number of different contexts. As such, the book responds well to the needs of end users and planners by utilizing a list-based approach which is easy to read and articulates the ideas coherently.

Library Signage and Wayfinding Design is a very useful book that should appeal to any person who develops library facilities or works in the design arena. The book can also be a particularly strong aid when writing Requests for Proposals for projects, developing a stakeholder engagement plan, or testing an idea. However, the neglect of larger spatial design issues and the need for more powerful design examples may create issues of credibility in the design community. Compared to wayfinding issues in transportation, healthcare or larger academic facilities, libraries are not often seen as locations for design excellence or innovation. Yet, aggressive and even experimental design ideas can be a source of inspiration when combined with innovative research methodologies and approaches. Indeed, the
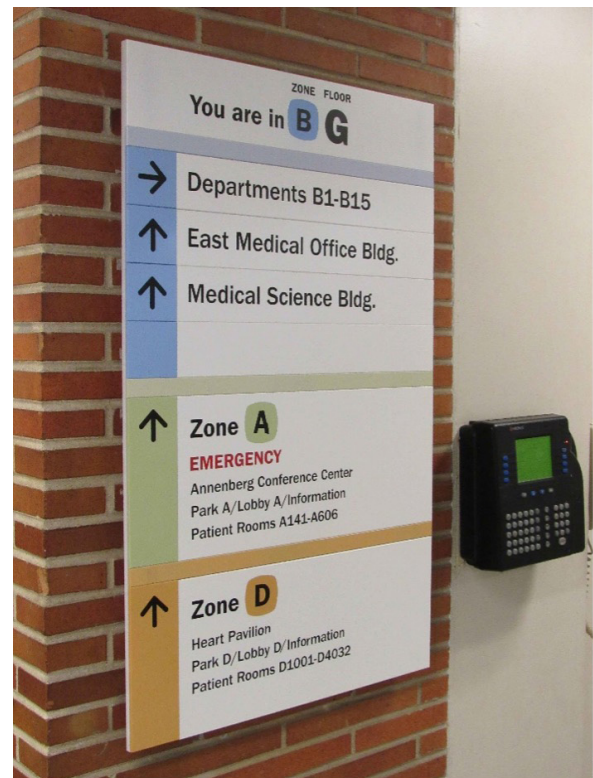
Figure 2 /

Libraries have many wayfinding issues that are similar to those found in other facilities like hospitals and labs. For example, the signage in Lankanau Hospital by Exit illustrates a variety of universal design issues including color, type and directional format.

marriage of design, place and information can provide the cues needed to take library projects to the next level.

Figure 3 /

The Seattle Public Library by OMA is a massive architectural landmark with spaces that required grandiose graphic treatments.