

Signage Perceptions, Experiences, and Aesthetic Judgements

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INTRODUCTION

This issue of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Signage and Wayfinding* presents a range of work truly reflecting both this journal's interdisciplinarity and its attention to both signage and wayfinding research. The title of this issue, Signage Perceptions, Experiences, and Aesthetic Judgements, reflects the range of scholarship included, but also highlights the complex nature of the multiple factors influencing the effectiveness of signage as an essential means of visual communication. As the articles in this issue demonstrate, the interrelated factors of regulation, design, and display context, taken together, will impact viewer perceptions and judgments about the messages on signs, and may lead to different viewer behavior entirely apart from the actual text used. Ultimately, the matters explored in this issue have important implications for commerce and wayfinding, as would be expected of explorations of signage effectiveness, but also connect with the range of related quality of life issues which underscore the importance of signage and wayfinding research in a broader societal context.

Regarding signage perceptions and aesthetic judgements, the Rakestraw, Crawford, and Lee article brings to the forefront the influence of local regulations, and the extent to which designers and non-designers agree or disagree on their perceptions of the results of those regulations with respect to communication effectiveness and perceptions of beauty, interest, and order. These findings are especially important for local elected and appointed officials who make and implement signage regulations and whose understanding of signage research and the potentially far-reaching impacts of their decisions may be very limited. Likewise, design professionals who advise on various aspects of sign regulation, design, construction, and placement may not be

surprised at the results but should be cautioned not to simply dismiss the perceptions of the uninitiated.

The results reported by Hong and Isaac relate to how we perceive and experience signs, and provide an eye-opening challenge to the assumption that billboards have their greatest impact in high-traffic locations. Certainly, those outdoor advertising companies with substantial billboard investments in high-traffic areas where they are able to charge substantial premiums based on potential view counts will want to read this article carefully, as will those advertisers paying the higher rates. While the authors do not claim to directly compare the overall impact of high-traffic sign cluttered locations vs. lower-traffic uncluttered locations, their evidence strongly suggests there is clearly more to billboard effectiveness than just the number of potential viewers at a specific location. Those engaged in signage research will not be surprised. Clearly this study provides the basis for well-designed follow-up studies to better understand the complex mix of signage design, context, and potential views.

Tullio-Pow, Yu, and Strickfaden also address important issues of perception and experience while providing much needed research results to inform public policy and standards for major retailers and shopping malls in serving the shopping needs of those with visual impairments. Their study, grounded in taskscape theory and multiple-method ethnographic perspectives, provides new understanding into how signage and wayfinding impact the shopping experience of those with visual impairments, based on the researchers' characterization of seven essential activities for those with visual impairment. Their findings provide a systems approach that can serve to inform those tasked with designing complex shopping environments for able-bodied people to instill balance and equity without compromise so that those with visual impairments are treated as full citizens with full access to shopping opportunities.

Simpson's work using three-dimensional eye-tracking heat maps adds an important methodological element to the growing collection of research using mobile eye-tracking technology to dynamically assess viewer perceptions and experience over time and space. Clearly, eye-tracking has become an increasingly important tool for expanding our understanding of viewers' response to signage in real-world contexts. Technological advancements have rapidly moved the technique from lab measurement of eye response to static images on a monitor and the predicted response based on photo images using 3M's VAS system, to dynamic measurement of eye movement in real-world environments using wearable mobile eye-trackers. Simpson's work seeks to expand on the representation of viewer gaze using 3D gaze projection heat maps. This is an important advance that deserves the attention of all interested in better understanding the complexities of the communication effectiveness of signage.

This issue ends with a review of a recent book that is very much about perceptions, experience, and aesthetic judgements, and has caught the attention of urban designers and others interested in urban placemaking. As Metsker-Galarza's review shares, the book has more far-reaching relevance for signage researchers with concerns about visual communication. *What the Signs Say: Language, Gentrification, and Place-Making in Brooklyn* is focused on helping readers understand how signs contribute to the creation and transformation of specific places, yet it also is very much about visual communication in a broader context, and the sometimes subtle and not so subtle ways of telling viewers what a business is and is not, and implicitly communicating who is welcome and who is not. As Metsker-Galarza notes, *What the Signs Say* is very much about critically assessing how the text and graphic symbols on a sign can contribute to the transformation of a place, whether signaling investment and inclusion, or displacement and exclusion.

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