Wayfinding, Public Art, Contextualization, and Communicating Neighborhood Identities: An Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

As is the nature of an interdisciplinary academic journal, this issue of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Signage and Wayfinding* again presents a range of scholarly work reflecting IJSW's disciplinary breadth and the different approaches of scholars to both signage and wayfinding research. The title of this issue, "Wayfinding, Public Art, Contextualization, and Communicating Neighborhood Identities," conveys a number of important but seemingly disparate research topics that on closer inspection show a surprising degree of overlap.

Perhaps the strongest overlaps exist between two articles on the increasingly common use of smartphone mapping technology for wayfinding, both reporting on studies to gauge its use, and its potential advantages and disadvantages. Ferri, Popp, and Wulfhorst in "Digital Directions: Smartphone Usage while Performing Wayfinding Tasks in Munich's Public Transit System" document the challenges of wayfinding in spatially complex public transit environments, and the unique navigational challenges presented. Issues such as transfers, delays, barriers, and user capacity all influence the usability of a system. Clearly how we navigate through these systems and interact with the surrounding environment has changed as a result of the ubiquitous presence of smartphones, providing a spatial-temporal strategy "that removes the reliance on our immediate environment and personalizes the wayfinding process" (p. 7), unlike using signs, maps, and transit schedules. Based on how travelers navigate the public transit system in a large city, the study found smartphone apps have replaced signs as source of directions, especially for confirmation during navigation. In a closely related study, Vaez, Burke, and Yu, in "Understanding the Effects of Urban Form and Navigational Aids on Wayfinding Behavior and Spatial Cognition" ask if navigators "can simply follow the

represented route on their smartphone to get to their desired destination, is there any need for signage and urban legibility?" (p. 22). Their three-group research design showed subjects using signage and urban form clues without "personal navigational aids" (i. e. paper maps or smartphones) had better landmark recognition than the paper map users, but the paper map users performed best on route accuracy and street-naming tests. The smartphone users score in-between the other two groups, in terms of acquired spatial knowledge.

Three other contributions to this issue, while seemingly focused on very different signage and placemaking issues, emerge to have significant overlap in terms of the implications and applications of the work for design and use of visual communication. Ellen Babcock's "Intersection: Road Signs and Public Art" documents in words and images how the opportunistic conversion of derelict signs along major streets and highways to highly visible and meaningful public art works provides an opportunity for placemaking and community renewal. Babcock notes that "many mid-century road signs … that remain in their original locations, still widely visible and accessible, offer unique opportunities as sites for public art because of their combination of changing and unchanging features" (p. 41). Babcock argues that the "already spatially and temporally contextualized sites of road signs as places for public art offer a model that is not neutral because most viewers assume that a sign is meant to directly communicate to a broad, moving public, and that the content is likely to be about wayfinding, products and services, or public service messaging" (p. 42). She goes on to highlight what some will interpret as the democratizing and social capital building potential of the conversion of abandon signs to public art, noting that "art in a sign is not detaching itself from everyday activities, it elbows itself into an often-crowded field of text and images in an adamantly not-white-cube, non-elite space" (p. 42).

In their field report, "Exploring Vernacular Signage Along America's Legacy Roadscapes," Auffrey and Hildebrandt explore the impact of vernacular signage design (especially when integrated with vernacular building architecture) and the importance of how signs respond to the natural, built and socio-cultural environments in which they are placed, and how they ultimately contribute to the creation and modification of that context. They argue that "the context in which a sign is displayed and viewed, reflecting the surrounding natural, built, and socio-cultural environments in which a sign is located, is equally important is essential for how well a sign is able to perform perform its intended function" (p. 47). Like Babcock's view of the potential of well-placed public art, Auffrey and Hildebrandt see the potential for well-done vernacular signage, to a greater extent than conventional signage following standardized designs, to contribute to the positive image of a business or organization, as well as the area in which it is located. As such, they argue that then explicit consideration of contextual sign design and placement is critically important "for understanding how past, present, and future signs have

and will serve to orient, inform, persuade, and regulate" (p. 48).

In the third contribution focused on context and placemaking issues, Mehta and Rahman describe in Visualizing and Communicating Neighborhood Identities their work on understanding, visualizing, and communicating neighborhood identities. Like the work of Babcock, and Auffrey and Hildebrandt, but to a greater extent with urban and graphic designers' eyes, Mehta and Rahman recognize that "Place quality, sense of place, and authenticity are sensory, psychological, and social constructs that are perceptible in forms, activities, and meanings of places" (p. 55). As they go on to note, "Much of this is visible in the material culture of places—in the architecture, art, public spaces, show windows, signage, artifacts in public spaces, as well as those that are in private space but visible to the public, and more" (p. 55). Given this foundation, Mehta and Rahman use a design perspective to communicate a sense of place and distinct quality for each of the neighborhoods in Cincinnati. They use qualitative and quantitative approaches to define a set of consistent elements that are then used to generate a single postcard for each neighborhood to represent each of the 52 neighborhoods of the city. The cards are intended to "comparatively present the individual identities of each neighborhood along with a collective identity for the city" (p. 55).

Finally, this issue concludes with a book review by Kyle Katz of Amanda Gluibizzi's 2021 book, Art and Design in 1960s New York, that "explores the intersectionality of art, design, advertising, and signage during the period of great social unrest" (p. 63). Katz notes the turmoil and transformation of the period, and "It is within this context, a city in crisis, that Gluibizzi examines the ways in which artists began to incorporate elements of the city, its design, its civic and commercial signage, into their art" (p. 63). Those interested in the history of cities and art, and the ways in which they influence each other, will enjoy the review.