

Wayfinding expertise

COUPLES RACING TO the maternity ward from the parking lot at Montreal's Royal Victoria Hospital frequently head up the stairs looking for Level 2. In their hurry, they don't realize they've entered on Level 4, well up a steep hill from the original Level 1 entrance, one storey down from the Level 2 maternity ward. They're oblivious to enormous signs and a huge arrow pointing them downstairs. What's going on?

"Stress will influence perception," says Romedi Passini, father of architectural wayfinding, from his research office in the Institut universitaire de g eriatrie de Montr al. "When we move through [our too complex] environment, we are selective about what we perceive. Mostly we see what we need to see. If you decide to take the elevator, you'll be looking for the elevator, not a sign."

Passini studies how people find their way. Now retired, he taught architecture students at the University of Montreal to design buildings that people can understand and navigate easily. "Everything that has to do with movement, the architect should express strongly so that people can read it. An environment that is not well articulated is going to get someone lost," he says.

People get stressed when they can't find their way, especially in places like hospitals or airports where they have something they must do, Passini says. "Wayfinding has to do with the evolution of mankind. If you got lost 5,000 years ago, you'd never find your way back. It affects us more than would be logical."

Passini entered architecture in his native Switzerland. He decided to study psychology as a way to create environments better suited to people, just as environmental psychology was emerging as a movement. For his 1977 doctoral thesis, Passini coined the term "wayfinding" to describe a dynamic process of interacting with the environment to reach a destination. He wanted to distinguish his concept from "spatial orientation," the ability to situate one's static self within a cognitive map of one's environment.

Passini pondered the ancient Polynesians paddling the vast, trackless Pacific Ocean, and decided that static orientation is

just part of the picture. Like Inuit traversing the vast, equally trackless Arctic, or the rainforest dwellers of Cameroon who navigate completely by sound, the Polynesians didn't know where they were, but did know how to get where they were going.

Passini saw how people interact with the environment. "In a complex environment, often you don't know where you are, but you do problem solving to figure out how to get where you're going. You devise a plan. It is dynamic."

Passini points out that architects have a responsibility to communicate clearly. He says in any complex building, "you should be able to read what is the major entrance, be able to see where information is, see stairs and elevators from where you make decisions. A complex area may have shops and offices. It's important for zones to have their own characteristics so you know where you are. The worst thing the architect can do is be ambiguous about the organizing principles. A labyrinth is the most extreme example of having no organizing principle."

Many public buildings are ungainly and lack reference points by which we organize space mentally. Passini and the late graphic designer Paul Arthur (the only graphic designer appointed to the Order of Canada) published *Wayfinding: People, Signs and Architecture*, (MacGraw-Hill, Toronto).

"What is most important is that the right information is available at the right place. [A wayfinding designer says] 'I would like people to orient themselves in such a way in this building,' and so determines what information is needed at each decision-making point. Then the graphics answer the question, 'In what form should the information be presented?' Information overload is accentuated when the information is not presented in a consistent fashion," Passini says.

In an unmistakable trend, Canadian governments are contracting for well-thought-out signage systems that are consistent, correctly positioned and appropriately informative. A sampling:

- St. Catharines is spending \$200,000 on wayfinding signage in its new sportsplex, currently under construction.
- Winnipeg is installing comprehensive downtown signage for vehicular and pedestrian traffic – its maps duplicated in visitor guides.
- Alberta Infrastructure is introducing wayfinding in Calgary's labyrinthine hospitals.
- City of Vancouver purchasing agent Syd Stowe says he has \$120,000 to offer a wayfinding signage consultant to fill outdoor frames to complete what city engineers call "a coordinated suite of street furniture," [bus shelters and park benches].
- to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, a Transport Canada program includes pedestrian wayfinding among other suggestions such as hybrid diesel/electric buses, telecommuting and carpool ride-matching.

A final word on Passini. Now retired, he continues to research wayfinding for people with disabilities such as blindness or dementia, while a lab associate looks at gender differences in wayfinding. We've all known the man who can navigate a teeming metropolis... only after his wife locates his car keys. ♪

Melanie Collison is a High River, Alberta-based freelance writer.



Functional and eye-pleasing, bronze three-dimensional maps are located along Confederation Boulevard (a collection of streets that make up Ottawa's ceremonial route) to help visitors locate points of interest in the capital. Each map is about 1.2 metres in diameter mounted on concrete, includes three legends and one interpretation panel, and is weather and vandal resistant.