



“Excuse me, which way is the wayfinding debate?”

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Shadowing at the Reference Desk is a lesson in spatial dynamics. Standing in the lobby after entering Bobst Library, with your back to the security desks, you will be in a small town of textured furniture, varied nations of people, and global culinary tastes and smells. It's a small, highly decorative, moving populace. From the reference desks' position at the far left corner, the entire lobby is visible with few blind spots other than the deeper interior spaces of the adjacent rooms. The lobby flows into one expansive area. You enter this town of Bobst, look around and, may then, look for help.

When approaching the Reference Desk, a patron's research inquiries are frequently interspersed with: Is there a bathroom on this floor? Is there a water fountain? Where is the printer? Is there a scanner on this floor? How do I find this book [library stacks layout question]? Despite the consistent and thoughtful responses from Librarians, the absence of wayfinding signage is evident. Complex design choices accompany any discussion of directional sign-making and requires layers of collaboration from Librarians, patrons and administrators.

Comfort is one of the greatest results of good wayfinding planning and execution. Clear signage that promotes ease of movement through space has been discussed for decades. Polger and Stempler (2014) state that having library signage be clear, in design and meaning, is born from the confluence of user collaboration and comprehensive design choices. Another layer of comfort is design that considers the sensual experience of interior spaces for diverse populations. A focus on neurodivergent users (those with autism, dyslexia, ADHD, dyscalculia, etc.) is one aspect of creating sensorial spaces. There are many other kinds of users to consider when designing wayfinding materials as well. For example, colorblindness complicates color coded design, hearing impairments confound audio cues, furniture that can be repositioned creates obstacles for wheelchairs and other mobility devices as well as creates unpredictable landscapes for the vision impaired. Pleasing everyone is an impossibility yet directing patrons to specific spaces with clear signage may reduce the stresses of learning a new environment or increase feelings of ease in familiar environments for those with accessibility and sensory needs. Experimenting with spatial configuration is necessary.

The physical library design may be at its best when reflecting the supple structural changes in the library culture which brings new technology, increased variety of materials and access points, the exponential

increase of collections and their variety, technological advancements and altered dynamics in patron interactions with the increasing use of online environments.

The library is more than a solid structure. It is also a dynamic alternative space that can be located anywhere that a user has access to a computer. When a library home page is difficult to navigate, changes are made quickly to improve that type of wayfinding, yet when considering the importance of physical wayfinding there are seemingly endless debates. Nuanced systems of global sharing require flexibility. Are accessible spaces, and streamlined wayfinding signage, to synchronize with the creation of sensory spaces and/or sensory programming that is accessible to all patrons within the library? Should each library be treated as a sensory space fostering different patron preferences and needs as the hub of design discussions? How best can to execute, simultaneously, wayfinding with sensitivity to accessibility within a library setting? Would sensory spatial concerns be addressed almost automatically when the focus of design is ease of population flow and clarity of direction to reach different spaces within the library? This would involve varied lighting levels (overhead and desk lamps), a variety of adjustable desk and chair heights that are conscious to positions of windows, natural light and sightlines. The size and shape of restrooms may be more carefully considered, too. Perhaps signs marking sets of accessible unisex bathrooms throughout the building would prove satisfying for staff and patrons. The different types of adaptable study spaces require clear signage to indicate expected behavior norms (private for one, silent open spaces, quiet open spaces, collaborative small study spaces, and open rooms). What is the best way to demarcate these boundaries?

The University of Manitoba libraries directed research into this realm of questioning. Warren & Epp (2016) conducted a “kindness audit” (2016) to analyze the use of space and signage within 20 locations of Canada’s Manitoba library system. Their abstract states that the “kindness audit” is a concept and assessment tool that’s used to determine “the right of users to be comfortable and self-navigate in library spaces”. The “intuitive wayfinding” (Warren & Epps, 2016) gives greater understanding of how users experience the library. One important characteristic of “intuitive wayfinding” is having clear sight lines and pathways within the space (Warren & Epp, 2016). The experience of the Bobst lobby as a busy town can be overstimulating and distracting without additional directional cues and may resemble an obstacle course at times, as noted earlier. Warren & Epp (2016) found that consistent signage, accessible service desks and electrical outlets increased how comfortable patrons felt within the library.

The issue with conducting research, surveys and interviews to support the need for comprehensive and consistent wayfinding signage is that the staff’s collective expertise and research results are often disregarded by policymakers and administrators. Deville-Holly (2024), contrasting academic and social needs of undergraduate and graduate students in academic libraries, found that both groups required effective wayfinding in order to choose appropriate study spaces of varying noise levels, access to study aids (where to find white boards, and functional furniture), natural light, privacy and seclusion if needed, and electrical outlets among other concerns (safety, security staff, and areas eating/lounge areas were also important).

The intention of this short piece is to continue placing the value on how public spaces feel to large groups of patrons, students in particular, and whether or not the design of these spaces can be comfortable and accessible as the primary focus of design. Wayfinding signage could help direct the flow of patrons through the building with more consistency and clarity. Signs indicating bathrooms, printers and different types of study spaces may seem like small additions yet these questions come to the librarians too often to be disregarded.

References:

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ARTICLES AND PROJECTS