WAYFINDING - A STRESSFUL NICHE OF INFORMATION DESIGN

In addition to its rolling stock and infrastructure, the efficiency of a public transport system also depends on a well-designed information system. Giving passengers a sense of security, while enabling them to reach their destination easily and access facilities en route, should be the goal.

“In theory, wayfinding design for public transport is not rocket science,” explains Giuseppe Attoma, founder and CEO, Attoma Group (Paris, Milan, Berlin). “It involves analysing passenger flows, the paths and shapes of the spaces in question, identifying crossing points and places where information must be provided. However, the task is more complicated when working on existing networks and having to manage a high level of complexity,” he warns.

Take a typical scenario such as managing the flows of passengers converging in the same space from different directions with different destinations in mind. One tempting solution might be to match all the options with information. Not a good idea, claims Mr. Attoma: “It results in hundreds of signs that are overwhelming and confusing: too much information kills information. Also, don’t forget that situations that generate anxiety, such as overcrowding or service disruption, reduce our cognitive capacities.”

A smarter alternative, he suggests, is to change the paradigm and work on the simple principle of ‘natural wayfinding’. “Essentially, this involves artefacts such as visual anchors, so that passengers can see orientation landmarks from a distance without interrupting their flow.”

Money talks, passengers walk

One advantage of a new-build public transport project is that natural wayfinding can be achieved to a certain extent early on – “as long as the architects or urban planners involved understand the importance of information
design,” points out Keichi Koyama, managing director, i Design inc. And given the stakes at play, they would do well to take this importance seriously. Passenger security, the first responsibility of every transport operator, depends on flow management. “Wayfinding is a strategic tool for managing and facilitating flows, for reducing the risk of crowding and panic,” explains Mr. Attoma.

Generally speaking, if the information fails, passengers are disappointed, and ultimately it’s the transport operator who pays the price. “Low customer satisfaction = less passengers = less revenue,” sums up Paul Mijksenaar, founder and partner, Mijksenaar design & consultancy agency. “Plus there’s the risk of spending more time and money dealing with complaints. At the end of the day, money talks,” he adds.

Solutions, contexts and universal design

No information, no transportation. It’s as simple as that. Yet delivering the goods for any given project calls for some serious thinking. At Mijksennar, the designers follow a four-phase approach, which, as explains Fenne Roefs, senior project manager, is broken down as follows: 1) input of demands for the architectural programme; 2) review of the architectural design; 3) lay-out of passenger flow(s) during the preliminary architectural design; and 4) designing the actual signs.

“Consideration must be given to the features of any specific context, while taking into account the actual capabilities of all the types of passengers,” recommends Mr. Attoma. “Only then can you start to build design strategies and solutions.”

In Japan, when working on public facility projects, information design teams have a set of ‘barrier-free guidelines’ at hand. Published in 2001 by the Foundation for Promoting Personal Mobility and Ecological Transportation, they specify over 100 standard information symbols that can be freely used by anyone. As Mr. Koyama points out: “Universal design is the key focus these days.”

“Yes indeed,” agrees Mr. Mijksenaar. “In public transport, the lack of standardisation represents a major challenge. Ideally, in line with the principle of ‘inclusive design’, there should be no difference in the presentation of information for different types of passengers.”
Priorities, colour and applause

The need for design is clear – without it the information risks being misunderstood and unappealing to passengers, with repercussions down the line for the whole system. But what about the relationship between form and function? Here Mr. Koyama insists the priority must be to design with easy visibility and understanding foremost in mind, which leads to the topical matter of colour coding. “It works well to distinguish multiple lines when continuously used, or when integrated on the chromosome, like blue for boys and red for girls in Japan,” he reckons. “However, an ineffective example is that of ‘green for departures’ and ‘yellow for arrivals/exits’, which in Japan is used in almost all stations and airports.”

Ms. Roefs considers colour coding as only really pertinent when emphasising or distinguishing a passenger process phase, like individual subway lines in the London Tube and Tokyo Metro, to highlight the link between all connected stations. “But in any situation it should be redundant,” she believes. “Good perception is bound to be minimal or critical due to light conditions, plus, don’t forget that this coding excludes colour-blind passengers.”

No news, good news!

The benefits of legible information are wide-reaching and offer a potential win-win for the public transport system in its entirety. Yet, when it comes to gauging the success of one’s design efforts, ‘no news is good news’. “Never expect any applause,” advises Mr. Koyama. “Signs and wayfinding are bound to generate plenty of complaints when poor, but none when they function well.”

Being highly aware of the importance of information design to public transport, UITP is partnering with the International Institute for Information Design (IIID) in 2017 to host a seminar dedicated to this critical, but often overlooked element of transportation planning.

A global network of individuals and organisations, IIID seeks to optimise information and its systems for knowledge transfer in everyday life, business, education, and science.

To find out more about this joint event, please contact: Agnès Peter, UITP manager for design, culture and marketing, agnes.peter@uitp.org.