BOOK REVIEW

Wayshowing – A Guide to Environmental Signage: Principles and Practices
PER MOLLERUP (LARS MÜLLER PUBLISHERS, BADEN, SWITZERLAND, 2005)
Review by Johan Redström, Danish Centre for Design Research

INTRODUCTION

Designing environmental signs that guide people as they try to find their way in an unknown environment is not about designing wayfinding as the literature often seems to suggest, states Mollerup. Rather, it is about designing wayshowing. Wayshowing relates to wayfinding as cooking relates to eating, or writing to reading – what the designer does is not to solve the problem of finding the way; what he/she does is to facilitate people's own problem-solving.

With the central distinction between wayshowing and wayfinding, Mollerup positions himself perhaps not so much in relation to our everyday use of what it means to show and find the way, but to previous work on the subject, perhaps most notably the work on wayfinding and architecture by Arthur and Passini during the 1970s and '80s (cf. Passini, 1984; Arthur & Passini, 1992). That this relation is of some importance here can also, for instance, be seen in that we find other ideas from their line of inquiry in Wayshowing, such as the notion of wayfinding as a "spatial problem solving process" that can be understood as a combination of "planning" and "execution".

In terms of the overall design of the book, a striking feature is the elaborate balance between written and visual content. Though the book certainly can be 'read' like most textbased books, the many illustrations and photographs, often by the author himself, also allow for a more visually driven approach to the content, which leads to some interesting reading experiences. In itself an illustration of some of the ideas presented, Wayshowing is indeed a very beautiful book.

CONTENT OVERVIEW

The structure of the book is based on two sections dealing with "Principles" and "Practices" respectively. In "Principles", Mollerup presents a general framework for wayshowing design including key concepts and basic theories, as well more specific design guidelines and recommendations. In the "Practices" section, the book presents a series of case studies as illustrations of how wayshowing design may work out in practice. Without going into a detailed description, let us consider some of the components of this rich picture of what wayshowing is all about.

As mentioned above, a key premise of this work is that wayfinding can be understood as a spatial problem-solving process composed of elements of planning and execution, or of decision-making and decision execution. To facilitate wayfinding, wayshowing design therefore needs to be based on an understanding of what this process looks like. To this end, Mollerup among other things presents nine strategies that people use to find their way: track following, route following, educated seeking, inference, screening, aiming, map reading, compassing, and social navigation. Important here is that all of these are rational in one way or another, and that they therefore have a certain logic that wayshowing design needs to build on.

For it to be possible for someone to infer the right way to, say, a certain building on the basis of street name and number, there needs to be a comprehensible structure behind them.

To use the book's framework based on semiotics and communication theory, we might say that there needs to be a structural analogy between the signifier and the signified. This example may also serve as an illustration of how the book connects quite general ideas from, for example, semiotics to quite specific wayfinding problems in an overall very compelling fashion without going too deep into all the (theoretical) issues involved. As the chapter title "Practical theory" suggests, this is indeed theory put to work.

Besides general conceptual tools for describing and understanding the wayfinding process, Mollerup also presents more specific guidelines for how to design signs, or rather systems of signs. We find useful discussions of a range of practical problems including typography, use of colours, sizes, and formats as well as mounting and placement and how to design signs for the visually impaired. Though the recommendations presented here are probably also useful when designing for smaller scales, a central design problem for Mollerup is how to create consistency and simplicity even when there is a very large number of locations and functions to be presented.

Becoming even clearer in the practices section as it centres on examples such as hospitals, airports, railway stations, and museums, the wayshowing design primarily dealt with here thus concerns rather large systems of official signs. So, the use of pictograms, for instance, is discussed in terms of not only how to design them in ways that make sense to a wide audience, but also how to keep their numbers down in, say, the design of the signage at an airport. Thus, this is about the aesthetics not only of signs and graphic design but essentially also of systems design.

READING WAYSHOWING
The notion of a 'guide' implies that, as with all guides, certain things will be included, others omitted. And as with all 'guides', these selections are made by someone – namely our *guide.*

As suggested in the introduction to this review, the book seems to invite the reader to read it in several different ways. Given the context for this review – an academic journal – an obvious starting point is to read it as an academic text. Doing so, a somewhat

problematic issue emerges in that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the more objective knowledge and theory presented and Mollerup's own interpretations and ideas as they are interwoven in often not very transparent ways. While this at first may seem to reduce the book's value as a more traditional academic contribution, this is, I am sure, a completely deliberate approach as it instead enables Mollerup to present something else that in some ways is more interesting.

By not hiding his own position at all, Mollerup really presents himself as our guide. Wayshowing is not just a problem – it is a design problem. And as we all know, design implies making decisions and taking a stance. And so when Mollerup states that "The names of streets, stations, and public buildings are often subject to chance or – worse – political caprice" (p. 121), it is of course also to make his position in relation to making such decisions clear to the reader. The book's position in relation to signage and its function is also quite evident, as when stating that "Normally, unofficial do-it-yourself signs are symptoms of unsuccessful planning"(p. 23) or "Some of the first signs in the world were probably a kind of graffiti. These trailblazers of visual wayshowing had little resemblance to the graphic weeds that are known as graffiti today. As a rule, contemporary graffiti have no practical purpose beyond that of announcing the existence and egotism of those who scrawl them" (p. 23).

The explicit normative stance, in combination with sparse discussions of opposing views and interpretations, suggests that this book is not intended as a more objective treatise of the subject matter. Instead, it seems we are presented with a design programme for wayshowing design. Understood as a design programme, the strong presence of Mollerup as our guide instead becomes interesting as we get a chance to see what ideas, values, and strategies are behind this work. Read this way, Wayshowing presents an unusually complete picture of a specific approach to design ranging from conceptual foundations to concrete design projects. As an example of how to form a coherent and consistent approach to such complex design problems, its value is significant, even to designers not primarily interested in wayshowing design as such.

When starting to 'read' this book from the pictures, a somewhat different set of questions concerning the relation between wayfinding and signage emerges. At times, the pictures seem to be telling a different, and in some ways more complicated story than the text does. Maybe it is just the old saying that a picture says more than a thousand words, maybe it is something else. Consider, for instance, the very first image of the book – a picture of the famous Hollywood sign at Mt Lee. If Mollerup's text seems to be concentrating on "here I am", pictures such as this seem instead to say something like "here I am", as they clearly not only state where something is and how to get there, but perhaps more significantly that something is, i.e. the sign as an expression of individual existence. Now, of course, the book deals with such aspects of signs, as when discussing for instance how restaurants and shops communicate their character and intended audience to people walking by – but there are no such examples in the practices section indicating that this existential (as distinct from the more instrumental) dimension of signs is not really a central concern here.

Possibly, some of this comes down to a basic axiom of this work, the idea of wayfinding as a spatial problem-solving process and the rational search strategies employed for doing this. In relation to another discussion in design contemporary to when such ideas were first presented by Arthur and Passini – i.e. the discussion of how the process of solving design problems can be understood – we might say that Mollerup here seems to follow the traits of Simon's ideas (Simon, 1996). But what about other ways of describing the nature of planning and problem-solving, such as the ones presented by Rittel and Weber (1973), Schön (1983), and others, where the issue of problem formulation is given a more prominent place? In a world saturated with visual communication, finding one's way at times seems to be as much about understanding the space, what it means to exist within it, and what else is there, as it is about resolving a more or less welldefined spatial problem. Is it this somewhat different perspective that Mollerup wants to present with the images: that the written content presents one side of the story, and the visual a slightly different one? Probably not but, once the thought has occurred, it is difficult to let go of it completely.

Maybe these are all irrelevant questions to ask. After all, the basic problem dealt with here is how design can support people in finding the most appropriate way from A to B – a problem that the book certainly deals with. And yet – the pictures do seem to be much more than illustrations of what is discussed in the text. But then again, the many ways one can read this book are also part of what makes it such interesting 'reading'.

REFERENCES

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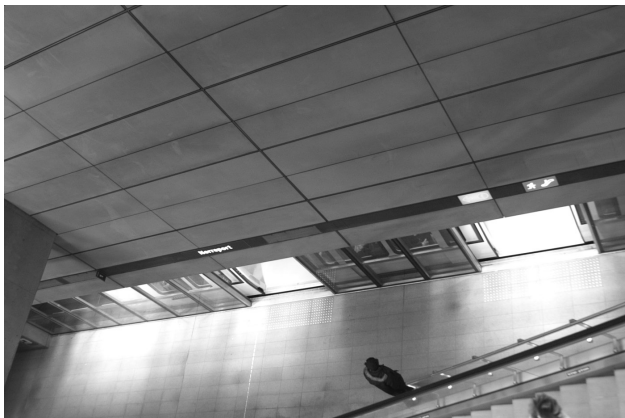
Figure 1.

Figure 2.

Figure 3.

Figure 4.

APPENDIX:
READING WAYSHOWING AS A TOUR GUIDE . . .

As it happened, the reviewer moved to Copenhagen at the time of reading this book, thereby getting the chance also to use it as a kind of tour guide when experiencing a new city. In this particular case, it also enabled a twofold experience of Mollerup's guidance, such as in this trip in the Copenhagen Metro system with its wayshowing design by Mollerup Designlab.