

A Complete Guide  
to Creating  
Environmental Graphic  
Design Systems

# Wayfinding and Design

## Signage and Graphics

Second Edition

Chris Calori  
David Vanden-Eynden





# **Signage and Wayfinding Design**



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Design Systems

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Second Edition

**Chris Calori**  
**David Vanden-Eynden**

Forewords by  
Tom Geismar  
Ivan Chermayeff

**WILEY**

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To our esteemed colleagues who made enormous contributions to the design profession:

- Jack Biesek
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And to Hanley Bloom, who contributed so much to the EGD industry before his passing.

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# Foreword to the Second Edition

We experience the physical world in different ways at different times.

On a vacation trip to Paris, just wandering through the streets and passageways of the Left Bank with no pre-determined route can be a joyful and serendipitous experience. But when first arriving in the city, whether at the airport or train station, we basically just want to know how to find the Metro or a taxi, and we rely on clearly visible and unambiguous signs to direct us.

When we need to see a doctor in a large metropolitan hospital, we follow signs and other visual clues that will hopefully get us through the maze of floors, disciplines, and services to the correct destination. But when we are a patient in that hospital, we would like the physical environment to be as calm and pleasant as possible.

Environmental graphic design plays a role in both aspects of these places. The signs directing us in and out of Charles De Gaulle Airport were undoubtedly the work of environmental graphic designers, working along with the facilities architects and planners. But in central Paris itself, signs of a different kind help define the character and ambience of that place we think of as “Paris.” Many of the shop signs, with their beautiful scripts and richly ornate letterforms, were the work of generations of skilled craftsmen. Professional architects and planners contributed in other ways. For example, the architect Hector Guimard’s Paris Metro entrances, with their famous Art Nouveau lettering, are used to symbolize Paris in many tourist brochures.

And while environmental graphic designers are often challenged to provide clear, functional and attractive wayfinding for hospital labyrinths, they also have a role in helping make patient areas visually calm and pleasant through the use of carefully selected color and artwork. In this sense, environmental graphic design clearly ties into the idea of “branding” when the design is helping to establish an environment that delivers an image and experience consistent with and appropriate to the goals of the institution or place.

As these examples indicate, environmental graphic designers, generally working behind the scenes, can have significant impact on how we experience the physical world. Since their work often directly effects





# Foreword to the First Edition

Regarding wayfinding, it might be noted that after you get there, in an ideal world, there would be very little that needs to be told about where to go, because on arriving at an unfamiliar destination the next directions would be self-evident. Within the best architecture, finding one's way around should hopefully require a relatively minimal effort and, at least, little signage.

If some sign is needed at all, it should be one of confirmation, to make a visitor comfortable with the path taken. It is far better to say too little than too much. To quote Mies: "Less is more."

Signage either adds some degree of quality to the environment in which it finds itself or it takes something away, diminishing the experience by being distracting to a visitor. If a message is there and is unnecessary, that's a serious distraction that should be avoided.

If a message is too big or too visually loud, if it overwhelms and negates other things such as the feeling of architectural materials, the play of light, reflections, the texture of surfaces, transparency, distant views, and a myriad of other environmental elements, including the presence and contribution of art or even the presence of other people, then the message is not quite right.

Too small a message or a direction misplaced by being too low or too high when its meaning must be instantly grasped and acted upon, doesn't help those who are insecure or hesitant and in need of help.

The best signage is in the right place at the right time, considers the viewer, and is neither overly repetitive nor demanding.

In fact, the best signage seems to take on an air of invisibility. It's there, but is taken in and taken for granted.

Of course, the opportunity exists for signage to add considerably to the excellence of any built environment, adding, by careful attention to details, color, compatible materials, and most importantly good typography that is easy to read and has character, often to reinforce the style and standards of the place, institution, or company which stands behind it.

Chermayeff & Geismar's iconic placemaking sign that has engaged and delighted millions of people passing by 9 West 57th Street in New York City since 1972, and will continue to do so for years to come.



The meticulous specification of all the elements going into the making of signage to meet the reality of each situation, to stay in balance, finding the best point between the most basic adequacy at one extreme and the performance of refined and sophisticated excellence in design terms at the other end of the spectrum, is what Calori & Vanden-Eynden consistently deliver time and time again.

Ivan Chermayeff  
Chermayeff & Geismar & Haviv



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# Introduction

Conversation with a New York City cabbie:

Cabbie: “Whaddaya do?”

Reply: “I’m a designer.”

Cabbie: “Oh yeah, designer. So you’re in fashion design, right?”

Reply: “No. I design signs.”

Cabbie: “Whaddaya mean, you design signs?”

Reply: “I design signs. I mean, when you drive fares to LaGuardia, how do you know where to drop them off?”

Cabbie: “I follow the signs. Wait, you mean someone designs those things? Never woulda figured that someone designed signs.”

Reply: “Well, God didn’t put them here.”

Cabbie: “People really do that, huh? I mean, design signs?”

Reply: “Yep.”

It’s been eight years since this book was first published. A lot has changed and a lot has stayed the same, including the relevance of the fictional dialogue above.

Environmental graphic design, or EGD, a relatively new hybrid of the design field, is fairly long on practice but short on theory and formalized methodology. The first edition of this book filled that knowledge gap by putting forth the first formal methodology for solving signage and wayfinding problems: the Signage Pyramid model.

This second edition—the first we know of for any book on signage and EGD—builds on the Signage Pyramid method with updated content and full color throughout. David Vanden-Eynden, my partner in design, business, and life, is co-authoring this second edition. His insight and hard work has made this edition even better than the first.

This second edition acknowledges some of the changes that have impacted EGD since the first edition. For openers, our professional organization, the SEGPD, has changed the root word for the “E” in “SEGPD” from “Environmental” to “Experiential,” but this book’s primary focus is still on environmental graphic design, as in graphics in the built environment.

This edition continues to discuss the design process in detail because this process is so important to the work of all designers. In the meantime, the business community has taken an interest in the design process, so while the design process remains the same, you may better recognize it repackaged as design thinking and repurposed for corporate problem-solving.

Branding is now a core element of identity strategies and EGD plays an ever-increasing role in creating brand identities, be it for large corporations, small businesses, nonprofit institutions, events, community initiatives, and the like.

Many people now possess smart phones, which give them personalized access to tailored information, including some wayfinding information. And *digital signage* is a hot term, but it mainly means deployed, nonmobile screens that deliver advertising/marketing information—when you enter a store, at the checkout lane, at the transit stop, on a city street, and so forth.

The Americans with Disabilities Act's (ADA's) 2010 Standards for Accessible Design (SAD) are significantly different regarding signage than the original 1991 Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG). SAD or not, the basic principles of typography, a key element of signage, remain true after nearly six centuries of practical application and refinement.

The physical world still exists and we still live in it and we still need to find our way through it. There are now multiple channels for communicating wayfinding information—digital and static—but the basic need for orientation still exists. After all, if the power goes out, that little blue dot on your smart phone map doesn't exist, but physical signs do and you suddenly realize how essential they are to conducting your life.

This edition, which acknowledges all of the above, still focuses on the very complex task of designing static signage and wayfinding systems that help people navigate their physical surroundings. This edition is for all those who work to make life better by designing signage and wayfinding programs that help fellow humans find their way through the real world.

Signage is visual communication design at its most elemental level, helping people read the world. You are what you see. And yes, *people* design signs.

# What Is Environmental Graphic Design?

Our need to hear and be heard, see and be seen, touch and be touched, that is, to communicate with our fellow humans, is fundamental to our well-being and, indeed, our survival.

Long before paper was invented, humans made marks on objects, such as cave walls, in their surrounding environment. The intent of making these marks, or signs, was to communicate information visually. This communication imbued these marks with meaning and they became a shared language among the people who made and understood them. (See Figures 1.1 and 1.2.) As such, environmental graphic design, or EGD, which can be defined as the graphic communication of information in the built environment, is one of the world's oldest professions.

And you thought something else was.

Since the invention of paper and the electronic screen, most people think of graphic communication as taking place primarily in those two media. But just like early humans making meaningful marks on environmental objects, in the present era an enormous amount of information is communicated on signs and other objects located in the built environment.

The contemporary incarnation of EGD is a relatively new, cross-disciplinary field that has gained recognition and importance over the past 40 years. Sure, signs existed prior to that point, but they tended to pop up in an ad hoc, unplanned, almost reactionary manner—in other words, pretty much as an afterthought. (See Figures 1.3 and 1.4.) As cities grew and mobility increased, making the built environment more complex, people's need for information to better understand, navigate, and use their surroundings also grew. Simultaneously, technological developments, such as photomechanical reproduction techniques and computer-driven cutting devices, aided accurate large-scale rendition of graphic elements, such as typefaces and symbols, on signs. Thus, the need for proactive, systematically planned, visually unified signage and wayfinding programs emerged.

If you don't think EGD is important, ask yourself: Could you understand how to use a large international airport or an urban rail transit system if there were no signs at all, or if the signs were a disparate mishmash of messages, graphics, and physical forms? The answer is most definitively no! As such, contemporary signage and wayfinding programs give a singular, unified voice to an environment or a site within it.



1.1

Looking to the future, there has been much speculation whether mobile computer devices with digital mapping and augmented reality applications will spell the end of physical signs. We say no, for many reasons, two of which are: Physical signs don't need a mobile device, signal, or battery power to operate; and not everyone is equipped with mobile computer devices. While there's no doubt that the various wayfinding applications on such devices have enhanced the way millions of people navigate the built environment—and will continue to do so—the word *enhance* is key. Our belief is that physical signs are here to stay, and that mobile digital devices offer rich opportunities for augmenting the communication function of those physical signs. More about digital communication systems,

**1.1** Before the written word, graphics communicated information and recorded events, as in these cave paintings at Lascaux, France.

**1.2** Environmental graphics from ancient Rome.



1.2



1.3

**1.3** A collection of ad hoc signs in Greece.



1.4

**1.4** Unplanned and uncontrolled signage in a building lobby.

including mobile devices, appears later in this chapter and in Chapter 6, “The Hardware System.”

To underscore the relative youth of EGD as a field, consider that the terms *environmental graphics*, *signage*, and *wayfinding* were barely in use 40 years ago. In fact, the word *signage*, whose origins are attributed to Canadian designer Paul Arthur, didn’t even appear in U.S. dictionaries until the 1980s. Nevertheless, in the 1970s, a group of designers found themselves designing graphics for a coordinated group of signs rather than for print. And because they often worked in architectural offices, and their design work related to architectural spaces, their work product was often referred to as *architectural graphics* or *architectural signing*.

These architectural graphic designers realized that there were significant differences between their design and print design (digital design didn’t exist then)—most notably that architectural graphics encompassed the planning and communication of information on three-dimensional (3D) objects in the built environment, which is far more complex than designing a two-dimensional printed piece, such as a poster, book, or brochure. As these architectural graphic designers discovered each other and the commonalities of their professional interests, they joined together to form the Society of Environmental Graphic Designers (SEGD). The words relating to SEG D were slightly changed several years ago to the “Society for Environmental Graphic Design” to focus on the field rather than its practitioners, and changed again in 2014 to the “Society for Experiential Graphic Design.”

With the birth of the SEG D, the term *environmental graphics* replaced *architectural graphics*, for two reasons. First, *architectural* was viewed as too limiting, in that this form of graphic design is often geared toward nonarchitectural open spaces, such as roadways, cities, theme parks, and



The SEG D (Society for Experiential Graphic Design) is a global community of professionals who create experiences that connect people to place. Through educational programs, its website [www.SEGD.org](http://www.SEGD.org), publications, and research, SEG D's mission is

to provide learning opportunities and resources for professionals involved in Environmental and Experiential Graphic Design (EGD/XGD), promote the importance of the discipline in establishing place, and continue to refine standards of practice for the field. SEG D members are leading developers of wayfinding programs; placemaking and identity projects; immersive media environments; exhibition and experience designs; and design research, strategy, and planning.

SEG D, 1000 Vermont Ave., Suite 400, Washington, DC 20005, 202.638.5555, [www.segd.org](http://www.segd.org)

so on—that is, the larger sphere of the built environment. Second, the term *architectural graphics* could be confused with the drawings architects create to document their building designs.

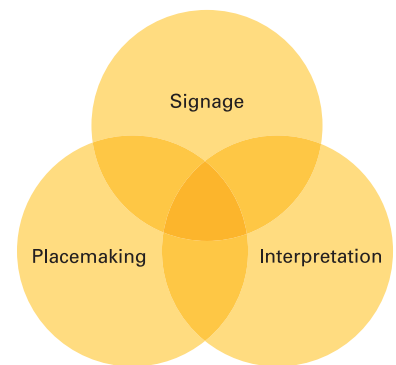
As noted above, in 2014 the SEG D changed the referential word for the “E” in “SEG D” to “Experiential” to broaden the SEG D member base. This has created some confusion and consternation as to what EGD activity is, particularly in the context of this book. As with the first edition, EGD is considered to focus on environmental graphic design, that is, the design of graphics in the built environment.

Regardless of whether the “E” refers to “environmental” or “experiential,” the SEG D has grown to become the premier professional organization for all designers who practice EGD. And *signage* is now in the dictionary.

## The Spectrum of EGD Activity

We've established that contemporary EGD activity involves the development of a systematic, informationally-cohesive, and visually unified graphic communication system for a given site within the built environment. Such sites can range from a single building to a complex of buildings to a city or to a transportation network connecting multiple sites on a regional or national scope—all of which have complex communication needs. EGD can respond to those environmental communication needs in three distinct but often overlapping arenas. As shown in Figure 1.5, these have been identified by one of our colleagues, Wayne Hunt, as:

- **Signage and wayfinding**, which orients people to a site and helps them navigate it.



**1.5** The three main components of EGD and how they can overlap.



1.6 Directional and identification sign at Philadelphia's 30th Street Station.

- **Interpretation**, which tells a story about a site.
- **Placemaking**, which creates a distinctive image for a site.

Although this book focuses on physical signage and wayfinding design—and in particular static, nonelectronic signage—the above three communication facets of EGD and their interaction apply to both the physical and digital realms, and warrant a bit more exploration.

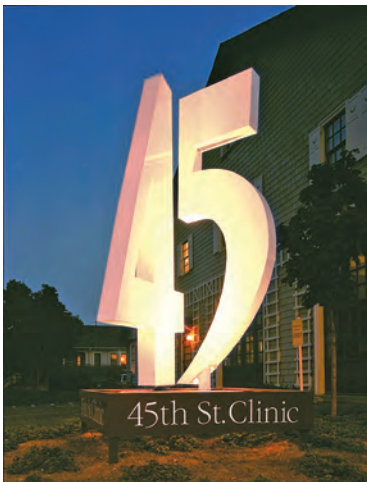
## Signage and Wayfinding

Signage and wayfinding are most commonly expressed in unified sign programs that informationally and visually knit together a site, a collection of related sites, such as regional parks or global corporate facilities; or networks, such as a transportation system. Examples of signage and wayfinding programs are shown in the Gallery section at the end of this book, as well as throughout this chapter and others in the book. In the sense that well-designed sign programs serve to visually unify a site, signage can perform a placemaking role by establishing a unique identity and sense of place, thereby creating a brand image in environmental form. (See Figures 1.6 and 1.7.) In addition to wayfinding and placemaking roles, signage programs can also communicate other kinds of information, such as warning, operational, and interpretive information, as examined further in Chapter 4, “The Information Content System.”

Although the terms *signage* and *wayfinding* are often used interchangeably, it's very important to keep in mind this distinction in mind: Typically, the primary objective of a signage program is to help people find their way through an environment, whereas effective wayfinding solutions often involve more than signage alone. (See Figure 1.8.) Clear, well-defined pathways and other visual cues, such as prominent landmarks, all aid wayfinding, as do printed maps, human guides, and, more recently, mobile computer devices that utilize GPS and augmented reality technology.

A key objective in wayfinding design, which our colleague Per Mollerup terms “wayshowing,” is to enable each person to form a mental map of a site or environment, so the clearer the physical layout of a site, the clearer those mental maps will be. In other words, even the most carefully conceived sign program can't solve all the problems of navigating a site that contains confusing, circuitous pathways. In such cases, the sign program is like using a Band-Aid to patch together a rather large wound: It's some help, but not a panacea. Think about it: How many times have you blamed the signs when you're having difficulty navigating a complicated highway interchange? In many such cases, the signs themselves aren't the problem; they can only do so much to guide you through what *is* the underlying problem—a poorly laid-out interchange.

Wayfinding is an active process, requiring mental engagement and attention to the environment one is trying to navigate. That is why in a

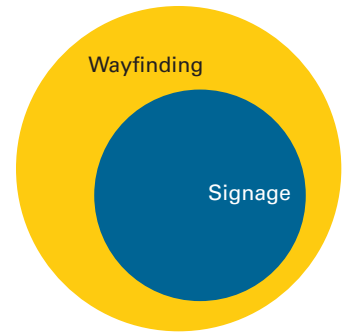


1.7 An identification and placemaking sign for a health clinic.

sports car rally, the navigator is just as important as the driver. The fact is, however, that many people are better at understanding information given to them verbally and so would rather ask someone how to go from point A to point B than to follow the signs or read a map. Signage and other visual wayfinding cues can, however, help even these people navigate their environment when there's no one around to ask.

## Interpretation

Interpretive information tells a story about the meaning of a concept or theme (e.g., democracy or science), an object (e.g., the Constitution or



1.8



1.9

**1.8** Signage plays a major role within the broader realm of wayfinding.

**1.9** Directional signage combined with interpretive information for a walking trail in Victoria, Australia.



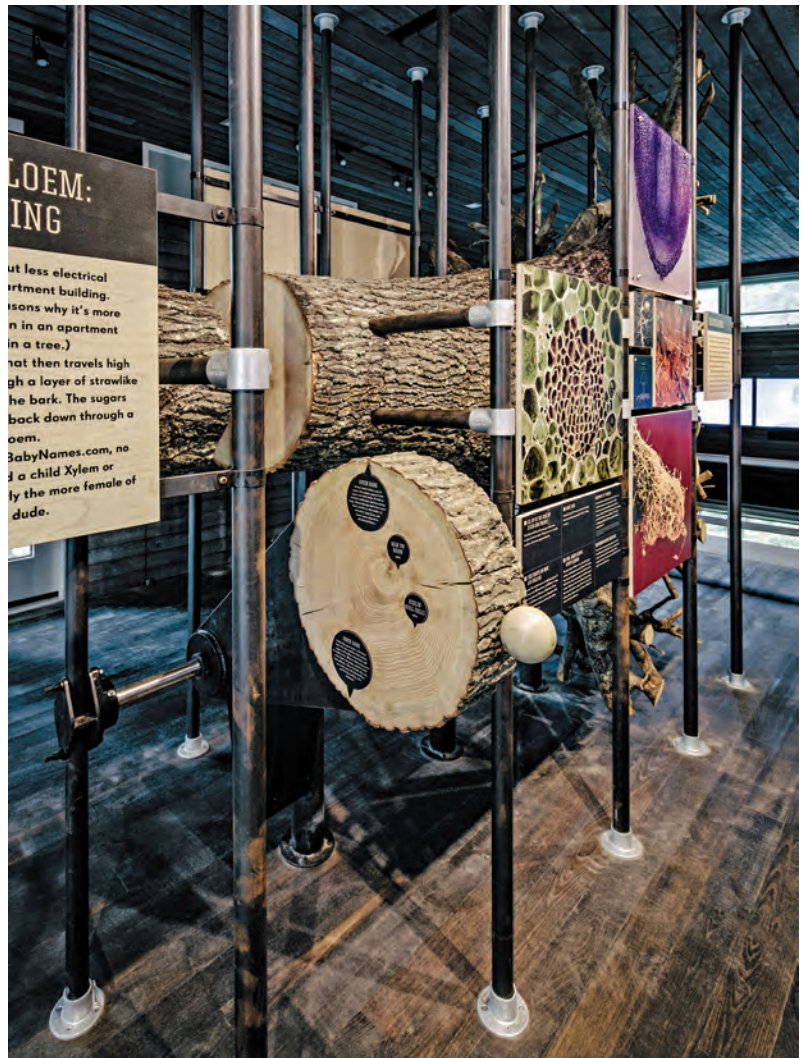
**1.10** Interpretive signage tells the story of Atlantic City's early beginnings.

**1.11** Interpretive information is often displayed in exhibits, such as this exhibit on sustainability for the Boy Scouts of America's Summit Bechtel Reserve in West Virginia.

an aircraft), a site (e.g., an automobile manufacturing plant or a national park), an event (e.g., the battle of Gettysburg or the Jamestown flood), a historical figure (e.g., Franklin Delano Roosevelt or Martin Luther King), a corporation and its products, and so on. Interpretive information is most often expressed in the form of *exhibitory*, which can be composed of a site itself, physical artifacts, audiovisual (A/V) and interactive media, static images and graphics, casework, and more. Interpretive exhibits can be temporary or permanent or exterior or interior. Exhibits can serve a placemaking role in that they often become destinations unto themselves. Interpretive information intersects with signage, in that interpretive information in the form of text and images can also be displayed in signage programs. (See Figures 1.9 through 1.12.)



1.10



1.11



1.12

**1.12** Interpretive and orientation panels on a kiosk unit in Bellingham, Washington.

## Placemaking

Placemaking creates a distinctive image for a site, and can be expressed in several ways. As already discussed, signage and interpretive exhibits can create a sense of place, as can gateways, portals, gathering points, and landmarks. What separates placemaking, in the EGD sense, from other forms of placemaking is the explicit communication of information through both static and digital channels.

Without this explicit communication intent, placemaking becomes an exercise of architecture, interior design, sculpture, theater, and so on. This is not to discount that EG designers may team with any of those disciplines in order to create placemaking objects or events, which are often monumental—typically in scale, but sometimes also in quantity—even if sometimes temporary.

New York's Grand Central Terminal or an exquisitely designed restaurant interior may convey a wonderful sense of place but they are not placemaking in the EGD sense, because their inherent purpose is not to communicate information. Times Square, on the other hand, derives its entire sense of place from the sheer concentration of signage—both static and electronic—surrounding it. And because the intent of all that signage is to communicate, even if primarily marketing messages, Times Square does represent placemaking in an EGD sense. (See Figures 1.13 through 1.15.)



1.13

**1.13** Placemaking at the entrance to Williams Gateway Airport in Mesa, Arizona, with sculptural flight elements.

**1.14** Banners are effective thematic placemaking elements as depicted in this study for the ANZ Stadium, Sydney Olympic Park.

## The Importance of EGD Today

As explained, the difference between EGD and other types of design is the explicit purpose of EGD to communicate meaningful information via words, symbols, diagrams, and images. Because of this expressed communication function, EGD plays a key—and increasingly recognized—role in how people use and experience the built environment.

Furthermore, the signage and wayfinding aspect of EGD is being recognized as a key contributor to a sense of personal well-being, safety,



1.14



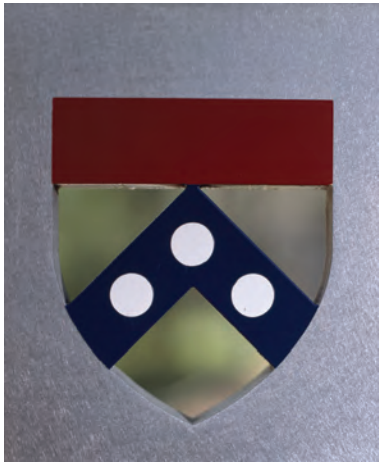
1.15

**1.15** A kiosk provides orientation and interpretive information at the same time it creates a sense of place for New York City's Chinatown district.

and security in unfamiliar and often high-stress environments, such as airports, hospitals, and cities. Additionally, EGD has gained importance for its capability to create a sense of place for a given site and for its power to reinforce a brand image.

Signage was once considered a necessary evil—or worse, an afterthought—but a growing number of people in the design, construction, development, marketing, and policy arenas have gained an understanding of signage and EGD's role in humanizing and demystifying the complexities of the built environment. They have found that well-designed signage and environmental graphic programs not only fulfill their communication function of informing, directing, and identifying but also serve to enhance the aesthetic and psychological qualities of an environment.

Certainly, EG designers are often part of the consultant team assembled by architects for a building design or renovation project, but EG design has finally come into its own, as well. Cities and universities are engaging EG designers, sans architects, to create signage and other EG design programs. Real estate managers are engaging EG designers, sans architects, to revitalize the image of a building or facility. Corporations and institutions, including transportation agencies, are engaging EG designers, sans architects, to unify environmental communication systems on regional, national, and global scales. Even general contractors and construction



1.16

**1.16** (a) and (b) The contemporary version of the University of Pennsylvania's crest brands every sign in its campus-wide program.



managers are including signage as a line item in their procurement budgets. All this has happened, in part, because people have recognized that signage and EGD design have a unique branding power. (See Figure 1.16.)

## Signage and EGD: The Brand Connection

The importance of brand strategy and management has risen to top attention within many organizations, large and small, commercial and institutional. Brand strategies recognize that people come into

contact with a brand via several types of “touchpoints,” and seek to maximize not only the quantity of those touchpoints, but also the quality.

A comprehensive brand strategy embraces signage and EGD programs as important touchpoints that have the power to build brand images in three-dimensional, environmental form. This can take place through *harmony* or *imposition* strategies.

Using the harmony strategy, the visual characteristics of a sign program can reflect and reinforce the visual characteristics of a site’s design or architecture to create a seamless, totally integrated identity. (See Figures 1.17 and 1.18.) The harmony approach works well when the signage program is being designed for an environment with a high level of visual unity, be it an existing site or, more commonly, a new development or major renovation, when design details can be coordinated among all the design professionals involved in the project.

Using the imposition approach, signage can create or impose a unique, singular identity on a site—an identity that’s completely independent of the site’s visual characteristics. This approach works well for existing sites that have disparate visual elements, such as cities, college campuses, corporate facilities, and transportation networks, that can be linked together by the metabranding of the signage program. (See Figures 1.19 through 1.21.)

In an ideal branding situation, signage relates to an organization’s or a site’s other communication channels, such as its website, mobile device applications, and electronic directories in a seamless brand expression. This is often not easily accomplished, since many large organizations have different departments responsible for these various communication channels. For example, a university’s marketing department oversees the website, its communications department oversees electronic screens, and the facilities department oversees physical static signage—and seldom are these departments’ efforts coordinated. Add in the fact that each department may have different procurement procedures and it can become quite difficult to impose a unified brand persona across all of an organization’s communication channels.

Whether a signage program brands by harmony or imposition, signage provides needed information to people using it, engendering feelings of goodwill and security, thus enhancing the quality of the brand experience. And since signage programs provide information that people actively seek, signage links this sought-after information directly to the brand. There is no doubt that good signage builds good relationships with any given