

# Signage and Wayfinding Design

A Complete Guide to Creating  
Environmental Graphic Design Systems



Chris Calori



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Environmental Graphic Design  
Systems

Chris Galori

Foreword by Ivan Orlmayer



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**Signage  
and  
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Design**



**To Dave Vanden-Eynden**



## Foreword

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.

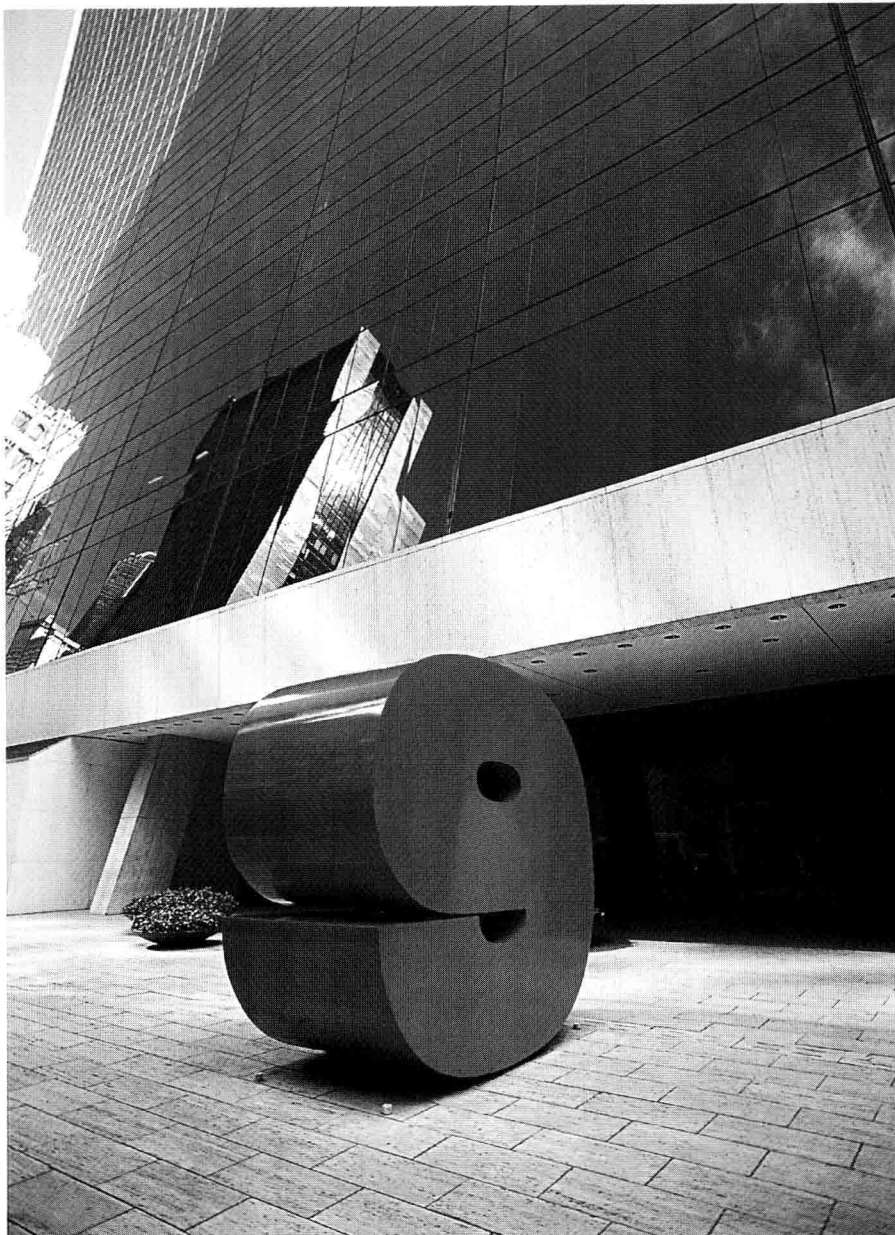
Too small a message or a direction misplaced by being too low or too high when its meaning must be instantly grasped and acted upon, doesn't help those who are insecure or hesitant and in need of help.

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



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All of you have helped make this happen, and I thank all of you from the bottom of my heart.



## 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 have to 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.”

Environmental graphic design, or EGD, being a relatively new hybrid of the design field, is relatively long on practice but short on theory and formalized methodology. This is natural, given that most of us practitioners have forged ahead on the fly, learning by doing, especially since no programs granting an EGD degree currently exist in the United States.

This book aims to fill this knowledge gap by putting forth what I believe is the first formal methodology for solving signage and wayfinding problems: the Signage Pyramid model. The book also discusses the design process in some detail, and it has a broad scope of other information—including the insights of distinguished EGD professionals on selected topics—that I hope will be valuable to anyone involved in EG design.

The world of EGD has become so large, so established, and so knowledgeable that I’ve left many things out of this book. Some of these omissions are intentional and others are not, so I encourage readers to make their own leaps and apply what’s in here to their own projects, keeping in mind that every project is different. You, the readers who were kind or curious enough to purchase this book, are part of the picture, so I invite you to get engaged and get what you can out of this book.

This book is here for gleaning, for discussing, for advancing our field and improving it—for clients, sign fabricators, and ourselves as designers. I

hope to inspire more people to enter our field—either as practitioners or as partners—and to promote a greater understanding of what we do and how it touches and improves everyone’s lives.

The dialogue will continue, we will all progress—and we will come to realize that signs cannot only offer incredible charm and sensory delight, but also become a beacon of reassurance and safety when we are lost.

A blend of graphic design, architecture, industrial design, and the other design professions, EGD, with its unique set of skills, helps us read the world. You are what you see. And, yes, *people* design signage.

# Contents

viii	Foreword
x	Acknowledgments
xiii	Introduction

---



<b>2</b>	<b>What Is Environmental Graphic Design?</b>
4	The Spectrum of EGD Activity
9	The Importance of EGD Today
12	You Can't Learn This in College
12	What's Ahead in This Book



<b>14</b>	<b>The Design Process</b>
15	The Client Is Part of the Process
16	The Design Process Applied to EGD
17	Phase 1: Data Collection and Analysis (Predesign)
19	Phase 2: Schematic Design
27	Phase 3: Design Development
36	Phase 4: Documentation
45	Phase 5: Bidding (Postdesign)
50	Phase 6: Fabrication/Installation Observation
60	Phase 7: Postinstallation Evaluation
61	Chapter Wrap-Up



<b>62</b>	<b>Overview of the Signage Pyramid Model</b>
62	Genesis of a Design Approach
63	The Signage Pyramid's Component Systems
66	The Signage Pyramid and Resource Allocation
69	Chapter Wrap-Up

## 4

### **70 The Information Content System**

- 71 Kinds of Sign Information Content
- 75 Hierarchy of Content
- 76 Developing the Sign Information Content System
- 86 Navigation: Message Hierarchy and Proximity
- 89 Other Factors Affecting the Sign Information Content System
- 98 Pictorial Information Content
- 100 Signage Master Plans
- 101 Chapter Wrap-Up

## 5

### **102 The Graphic System**

- 103 Typography Overview
- 104 Choosing a Typeface
- 108 Typographic Treatment
- 114 Typographic Considerations in Signage for Nonsighted and Low-Sighted People
- 115 Symbols and Arrows
- 120 Diagrams
- 124 Other Graphic Elements
- 125 Color
- 131 Layout
- 145 Overview of Signage Graphic Application Process
- 150 Chapter Wrap-Up

## 6

### **152 The Hardware System**

- 152 Shape
- 158 Connotations of Form
- 161 Sign Mounting Considerations
- 166 Sign Size Considerations
- 168 Sign Lighting Overview
- 172 Sign Materials Overview
- 175 Basic Sign Materials
- 187 Electronic Message Display Devices
- 189 Stock Sign Hardware Systems
- 190 Sign Materials and Codes
- 191 Overview of Coatings and Finishes Applied to Signs
- 197 Chapter Wrap-Up

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198 Project Credits

200 Bibliography

202 Index

**Signage  
and  
Wayfinding  
Design**





# What Is Environmental Graphic Design?

What a long, strange trip it's been.  
—*The Grateful Dead*

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. Because of their communication intent, these marks were imbued with meaning and became a shared language among the people who made and understood them. 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 television or computer screen, most people think of graphic communication as taking place primarily in those two media. But just like those cave people making their 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 30 years. Sure, signs existed prior to that point, but they tended to pop up in an ad



1.1



1.2



hoc, unplanned, almost reactionary manner—in other words, pretty much as an afterthought. 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. 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.

To underscore the relative youth of EGD as a field, consider that the terms *environmental graphics*, *signage*, and *wayfinding* were barely in use 30 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, what they were doing 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—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,

**1.1** Before the dawn of civilization, environmental graphics communicated information.

**1.2** Environmental graphics from ancient Rome.

**1.3** Ad hoc signage in Greece.

**1.4** Unplanned signage in a public building’s elevator lobby.



1.3



1.4