When your visitors want to find you, have a great time, and get home, can they? Everything you are “speaks” to your visitors non-verbally (walls, color schemes, navigation aids, even rest rooms). But do your efforts use languages that convey exactly what you want?

After a brief introduction on how well or ill facilities can communicate, participants are invited to air their thorniest visitor challenges and have their colleagues help resolve them.

**Introduction**

There are an estimated 117,000 libraries and 17,500 museums of all kinds in the United States today. Through all those public institutions, and so many others, there is a steady stream of visitors, some of whom have no idea how to get where they are going, or how they will find what they want when they get there. Resolving these shortcomings for all your visitors is—as much as anything—the job of your facility and your personnel.

“Speaking to your visitors” requires a coordinated and interdisciplinary approach. This approach includes how you think about your institution and its visitors, what content you make available to your visitors, and what physical elements you provide for visitors’ use and edification.

**Physical Elements and “C”onsiderations**

The **Physical Elements** available to a visitor for all purposes can be grouped into four general categories: **Spaces, Structures, Objects, and Content**. None of these tend to be used in isolation, one from another, nor are they ever necessarily encountered in that order.

Properly designed and sequenced, physical elements allow visitors to undertake their own personal mental processes, and progress from introduction to processing to decisions to action in a smooth and productive continuum. To facilitate these activities, spaces, structures, objects, and content must be “legible.” Legibility means to be readable, and comprehensible. Since physical elements are meant to be accessed, approached, entered, moved throughout, and exited, it is necessary that they possess unmistakable positive **“C”onsiderations** in order to function well. A sampling of “C”onsiderations are listed after the Physical Elements. (They all start with a “C.” Clever!)

**Physical Elements**

**A. Spaces.** We humans have a long background of relating our location to that of the sun, moon, and stars. In outdoor settings that relationship is used, sometimes unconsciously, for orientation. On a more regional scale, landmarks such as mountains, hills, and rivers offer similar opportunities. Locally, visual recognition of landmarks and vistas can impact how a visitor recognizes a place, chooses a direction, is attracted to something, or follows a route.
Physical Elements, continued

**B. Structures.** Built environments fall into only a few broad categories of usage: residential, commercial, industrial, recreational, educational, medical, and governmental. Generic elements used to sculpt structures include spaces, shapes, scales, colors, paths, textures, boundaries, sight lines, lighting, sounds, and temperatures. These qualities are embodied in specific elements such as doors, windows, walls, ceilings, or stairs. To the largest extent possible, these elements should be designed and constructed as part of a master program, adhere to the qualities of “legibility” (yes, Structures can be readable and understandable, as can Spaces), be aesthetically pleasing, and be composed of sustainably acquired and non-toxic materials.

**C. Objects.** “Objects” refers to any natural or man-made element smaller than a structure. This could include something as large as an information desk or as small as a doorknob. This also includes printed materials of all kinds. As with structures, all objects should be designed, installed, and operated as part of a master program, adhere to the qualities of “legibility,” be attractive, and be made of sustainably acquired and non-toxic materials whenever possible.

**D. Content.** In order to function for visitors’ uses, spaces, structures, and objects need content. Aside from the general elements of color, shape, etc., “content” also refers to more explicit components in the environment, as well as in published and digital media. There are five general categories of content:

1. **Graphics.** Drawings, diagrams, schematics and similar visuals are more commonly used for exhibits and displays, but also come in handy for wayfinding, branding, and marketing. A map is the most common non-symbol graphic used by visitors. It is also the second most popular navigation tool sought by visitors, after a knowledgeable staff member. An attractive map also works well as a branding and marketing tool and enhances an institution’s visitability. (Visitability encompasses every aspect of an institution’s amenities, offerings, and creature comforts no matter how small or large, and addresses their qualities.)

2. **Images.** Photographs, videos, scale models, and reenactments are popular for printed pieces, computer installations, kiosks, and introductory theater presentations. They are used less for non-electronic signage, but are used extensively in interpretive installations.

3. **People.** Knowledgeable staff, properly trained and located, can be the most successful component in an institution’s visitation arsenal, and is the source of information most sought after by visitors to museums and libraries.

4. **Symbols.** Recognized standard colors and graphic symbols for accessibility, activities, direction, lodging, services, transportation, and warning are essential for legible communication, particularly for comprehension by people who do not read the written language in any given location. Institutional logos or corporate marks can also serve as devices for identity, branding, promotion, marketing, and enhancing visitability.

5. **Text.** The written word constitutes the bulk of content when signage, printed media, and electronic devices are considered. Amount of text, sizes, colors, and contrast vary by use. Several requirements for appropriate type styles, contrast with background, height-to-width ratio, stroke width-to-height ratio, and height-to-viewing distance are set down in the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1991, revised (ADA), and other sources.
“C”onsiderations

1. **Cash.** Funding is essential for projects undertaken by all institutions, no matter the size: Many institutions create budgets and fundraise -- at least a healthy percentage of their needs -- before starting a project.

2. **Chain of events.** Sequencing a project or splitting it into stages can be very advantageous, especially for any larger or more complicated undertakings: a building renovation might be scheduled by stages in pre-planning, planning, funding, design, contracting, site work, major construction, completion, marketing, and inauguration and by so doing, accomplished over more than one budget period.

3. **Check List.** It’s very productive to have a comprehensive list of all known components of a project before starting anything: it may expand or contract; it may end up being only a “wish list,” but it affords everyone involved a look at the whole picture up front.

4. **Circulation.** Logic of flow plays an important part in visitors’ comfort, use of space, understanding, and enjoyment: Circulation necessarily proceeds from the macro (airports, highways, parking lots, grounds) to the micro (exhibits, rest rooms, benches) by way of:
   1. **Paths.** The routes available for movement, in two (on the ground) or three dimensions (walls, hedges).
   2. **Edges** (including walls). The boundaries or barriers between regions or elements.
   3. **Districts.** Identifiable regions into which, and out of which, visitors can move (vestibules, galleries, atria, etc.).
   4. **Nodes.** Locations on which visitors can focus and into which they can enter. They may be intersections, activity centers, or convergences of paths.
   5. **Landmarks.** Points of focus, like nodes, but primarily important to visitors at a distance for direction, orientation, or intrigue. (1-5: Lynch, Kevin: 1960, MIT Press: *Image Of The City*)

5. **Clarity.** Understanding of the form and function of practical elements should be easy to acquire by anyone: All physical and digital information should be presented in “languages” understandable by the majority of visitors.

6. **Cleanliness.** Clutter and dirt can be disorienting, unappealing, or dangerous: Clean rest rooms are essential for visitors’ well-being, and are an important part of an institution’s marketing and visitability.

7. **Clues.** Functioning parts need to have their operation “transparent” in their design: It should be obvious from the look and feel of a door’s handle, for example, whether it is meant to be pushed, pulled, or turned.

8. **Cognitive Map.** The process by which people make representations of their environment in their brains based on background knowledge and their experience of that environment as they move through it. An institution’s environment should teem with information suitable for the formation of everyone’s “mental map.” A person who is blind would make a very different mental map of a spatial experience from any map made by a person who can see.

9. **Color.** The importance of using color in appropriate ways cannot be overstated, and there is a huge body of work dedicated to the meanings, powers, and energies inherent in different hues: Color can set a tone, enhance a brand, or provide a visual escort through a complicated environment. Green is soothing, and usually implies “go;” while red is high energy, and is used often to mean “stop,” or “look.”
10. **Comfort.** An environment should be psychologically and physically easy to use, and provide creature comforts: Low sound levels usually calm and soothe people, and contribute to a facility’s visitability.

11. **Communication.** Physical elements should be designed and located in order to telegraph their functions: Large ornate centrally located doorways say “grand entrance.”

12. **Community.** Environments should be designed with an overall sense of inclusion: Physical features designed to accommodate visitors with disabilities commonly function better for all visitors. (This is the basis of Universal Design, defined as: Physical sites, systems, and attitudes that are designed and built to accommodate as wide a range of people as possible with the fewest exceptions or special cases.)

13. **Completeness.** If a facility needs something that is not there, it is incomplete: Providing staff members for visitor assistance is great, and fairly common, but if the personnel are not properly trained, equipped, dressed, and positioned for the task, their function is incomplete.

14. **Compliance.** Federal, state, county, and town regulations need to be followed: Designs for all aspects of a project must be cleared with the appropriate regulatory statutes as early in a project as possible.

15. **Composition.** Elements should be shaped, sized, scaled, colored, positioned, oriented, and related to one another in ways that enhance visitors’ awareness and improve their movement and enjoyment: Any given wall can be an impediment or a channel for movement.

16. **Concept.** Having a general theme for a physical place enhances the visitor experience and an institution’s mission, brand, and visitability: During the 19th Century, the concepts of “library” and “museum” were imprinted on the consciousness of Americans using imposing architecture. That continues into the 21st Century, but the definition of “imposing” has evolved.

17. **Conciseness.** An environment should include all the information needed but no more: Simpler is better, especially in interpretive labeling.

18. **Conservation.** Physical elements can be installed to increase public awareness of existing problems: To prevent environmental degradation of sensitive areas by visitors; and -- by using sustainable and non-toxic materials -- as ecological solutions in themselves.

19. **Consistency.** Once an element is introduced in a certain way, its use should remain the same throughout all applications: Identical waste receptacles placed on the right side of each public door would be an example of a constant.

20. **Conspicuousness.** Elements should be sized, shaped, and placed according to their use: Interior spaces intended as gathering areas should be large, centrally located, and easily accessed by multiple routes.

21. **Consultancy.** Specific experience can be found in many places: You can tap into the knowledge of your staff, board, volunteers, friends, providers, contractors, special interest groups, and advocacy groups, as well as paid consultants.

22. **Contrast.** Elements with different functions should be distinguishable as such: A glass door should not look like a glass window; white text on a light gray background is low in contrast.

23. **Control.** Periodic evaluation of a facility is necessary to stay informed about subjects such as safety, security, cleanliness, meaning, and relevance to visitors: Evaluation must be accompanied by a willingness to maintain, update, renovate, or improve anything found amiss.
24. **Conventions.** Conventions are commonly agreed upon standards or rules: Using yellow or orange as warning colors are examples of conventions.

25. **Correctness.** Elements should be as accurate as possible: The phrase “visitor services” has come to mean information available for attractions outside a facility. It is used incorrectly, then, on signage referring to amenities inside a facility, such as a food service or restroom.

26. **Correlation.** Visuals such as maps and signs should agree with the facility they represent in overall layout and in their details: A generic sign with an arrow pointing 90° left would not correlate with a 45° left turn on a path or in a hallway.

27. **Creativity.** An attractive, innovative, or engaging environment will enhance visitor appeal, prolong involvement, and stimulate content absorption: A willingness to break new ground in approach, design, materials, and function comes in handy.

28. **Culture.** Each institution is unique. This speaks to its mission, purpose, brand, intention, physical appearance, and offerings to its visiting public: Be proud of what/who you are, and strive to communicate what you have/do that no one else has/does.

29. **Current.** Environments should be kept up to date: Repairing, improving, and evolving might all be needed to meet the changing needs of visitors and maintain an institution’s brand, relevance, and meaning.

Questions? Comments? Please be in touch: dennis@mapsandwayfinding.com

**ENJOY!**