

Easy In, Easy Out

Wayfinding in Parking Structures Critical to User Experience

Parking garages are the only buildings that require the users to play two roles, driver and pedestrian.

Each requires a different behavior. The driver is confronted with getting oriented in an alien environment while operating a moving vehicle (and in this day and age, too often multi-tasking on a smart phone and stressed at arriving late). The driver must then make a rapid transition to being a pedestrian and focus on a whole new set of wayfinding challenges.

Orientation and signage programs must seamlessly transition back and forth from driver to pedestrian. To do so, there are a number of factors to consider.

1. The Way the Garage Functions

In the book, *The Parking Garage*, Sharon Sanders McDonald appropriately states what makes a great parking place. “First and foremost, a parking facility must serve the user.” To that end, wayfinding is critical. The primary wayfinding tools are signs – directional, information and identification. Beyond signs,

garages have incorporated a variety of other approaches to help orient both the driver and the pedestrian.

These can include visual enhancements such as the practical use of color to designate floors and areas or the dramatic use of color, themed and grand scale graphics, and a host of other interesting orientation cues that also contribute to a garage’s ambiance.

Technology also plays a key role in today’s user experience. Capacity counters, floor availability, pay on foot machines all make it easier to negotiate the garage.

Pacific Plaza Garage accentuates color as an orientation feature for this commercial parking garage.





Santa Barbara's historic district mandated signs created in the fabrication techniques of the period to assure the civic garage fit the context of the area.

Personal interaction to influence user behavior can have great results. For example, the owners of Broadway Plaza Shopping Center in Walnut Creek, California posted 'greeters' at each entry during the first month of operation.

Each entrant to the garage was given a quick orientation of where to park to most conveniently reach their destination, along with a logo key chain. As this was the visitor's first encounter with the new garage, the personal touch was extremely effective in influencing future behavior of patrons to the center and the key chain bought customer loyalty. Digital counter technology incorporated into a sign that integrates with the architectural style lets users know availability.

2. The Way the Garage Looks

Current garage design is decidedly focused on creating better looking buildings. The concrete bunker of the past is becoming increasingly rare. While architectural design is primarily focused on what the world sees on the outside, what one encounters inside is equally important.

A key aspect of the interior experience is graphics. Paint is the most cost effective way to address interiors. Expanses of walls can be covered with color, contributing to the ambiance as well as addressing the challenging light levels in most garages.

The areas around the elevator cores invite enhanced treatment with changes of wall and floor materials, themed graphics, original art or changing exhibits and even furniture. While the pedestrian parker is destination focused, lighter, interactive touches have been shown to greatly humanize the parking experience.

3. The Garage as an Expression of Brand

Much has been said about the importance of the garage as a 'front door' to the business, institution or organization it serves. The experience must capture and express the essence of the brand.

Santa Barbara's downtown garage is located in an historic district with especially stringent architectural controls. The signage for the facility is designed to reflect the character of the period of the city's founding. The

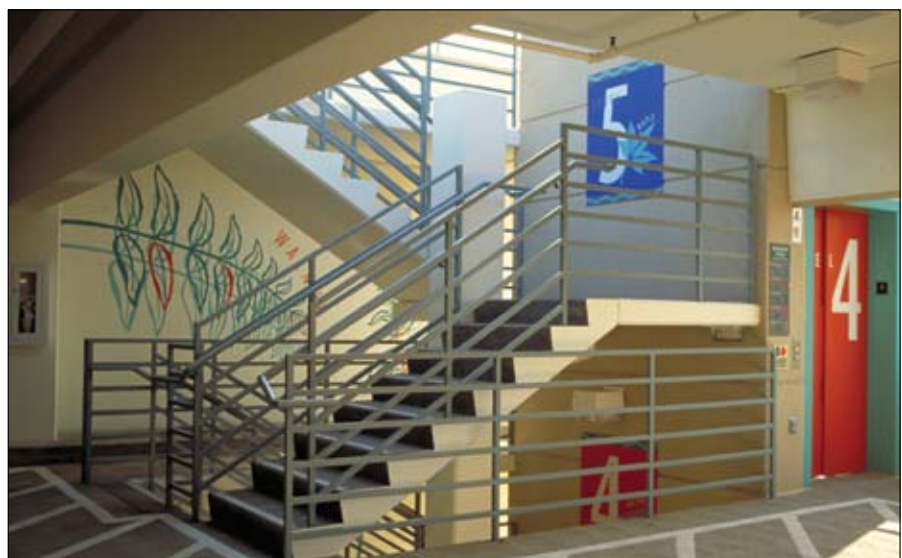
execution of the period design went so far as to replicate the foundry techniques used in the 1800s to produce the wrought iron brackets and stanchions.

Hospitals, universities and other institutions that build multiple garages have the opportunity to extend their brand identity while adding economies to their signage and wayfinding programs.

By creating standards that include the brand's colors, typography, symbols, shapes and other graphic elements, the host's image is enhanced, the cost to design



Paint is the most cost effective way to provide users directions.



Broadway Plaza Shopping Center incorporates festive, colorful wayfinding graphics at elevator cores, stairwells and other prominent locations throughout the facility.



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and fabricate the signs are greatly reduced and the user is reassured by communications that is familiar.

Make Wayfinding Count

While wayfinding and signage represents just a small facet of the overall design of a parking garage, they can make the difference between a highly appealing user experience and one that frustrates, annoys and diminishes the brand they seeks to serve. ■

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PARK AND FLY

Airport garages present additional wayfinding challenges

While airport parking structures share the same wayfinding issues as other garages, they are complicated by the extended stay nature of their use.

Wayfinding planning for airport facilities must incorporate all standard garage signage conventions, including color coding, alpha-numeric designations, wall and column graphics and super graphics and clear directional signs. Accentuation through size and repetition of these wayfinding cues can emphasize the importance of paying attention when parking and assist when returning.

Reminder signs that suggest parkers take (written) note of their location can make their return arrival less stressful. Where shuttles take parkers to their terminal, a paper reminder with the car's space designation is standard practice.

Technology is now providing additional assistance at both the facility and individual levels. At London's Heathrow Airport, the Car Finder program invites drivers to enter their license plate number and a computer displays the location of their car. A number of airline smart phone apps include a place to take a photo of the car's location so it can be conveniently recalled upon return (<http://bit.ly/jnSGF0>).



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