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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



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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.



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The Society for Environmental Graphic Design

SEGD is an international nonprofit educational organization providing resources for design specialists in the field of environmental graphic design; architecture; and landscape, interior, and industrial design. SEG D members are leading designers of directional and attraction sign systems, destination graphics, identity programs, exhibits, and themed environments.



Society for Environmental Graphic Design, 1000 Vermont Ave., Suite 400, Washington, DC 20005, 202.638.5555, www.segd.org

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, now the Society for Environmental Graphic Design (SEGD).

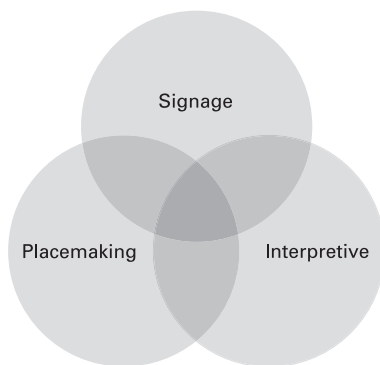
With the birth of the SEG D, the term *environmental graphics* replaced *architectural graphics*, for two reasons. First, *architectural* was viewed as too limiting, in that this form of graphic design is often geared toward nonarchitectural open spaces, such as roadways, cities, theme parks, and so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

The SEG D has since 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, informational-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. These have been identified by one of my colleagues, Wayne Hunt, as:

- *Signage and wayfinding*, which orients people to a site and helps them navigate it.
- *Interpretation*, which tells a story about a site.
- *Placemaking*, which creates a distinctive image for a site.



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

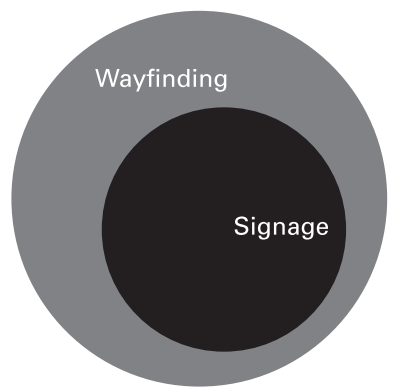
Although this book focuses on signage and wayfinding design, these three communication facets of EGD and their interaction warrant a bit more exploration.

Signage and Wayfinding

Signage and wayfinding are most commonly expressed in unified sign programs that informationally and visually knit together a site. Examples of signage and wayfinding programs are in the color plates and in Figures 1.7 through 1.9, as well as throughout other chapters in this book. In the sense that well-designed sign programs serve to visually unify a site, signage can perform a placemaking role by creating a unique identity and sense of place, thereby effectively creating a brand image in environmental form. 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 important distinction: Typically, the primary objective of a signage program is to help people find their way through an environment, whereas effective wayfinding solutions often require more than signage alone. Clear, well-defined pathways and other visual cues, such as prominent landmarks, all aid wayfinding, as do printed maps, human guides, and, more recently, portable GPS systems.

A key objective in wayfinding 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



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1.6 Signage plays an important role within the broader realm of wayfinding cues.

1.7 Directional and identification signage at Philadelphia's bustling main train station.



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1.8 An identification sign in a series developed for this greater Philadelphia township.

1.9 A directional sign with an interpretive panel on the right at the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) campus in Chicago.



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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 badly laid-out interchange.

Wayfinding is an active process, requiring mental engagement and attention to the environment one is trying to navigate. That is why the navigator is just as important as the driver in a sports car rally. 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.

Interpretative

Interpretative information tells a story about the meaning of a concept or theme (e.g., democracy or science), an object (e.g., the Constitution or an aircraft), a site (e.g., an automobile manufacturing plant or a national park), an event (e.g., 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 *exhibitry*, which can be composed of a site itself, physical artifacts, audiovisual (A/V) and interactive media, static images and



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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.

1.10 Interpretive information is often communicated in exhibits, such as this exhibit on collegiate sports at Brigham Young University (BYU) Legacy Hall in Provo, Utah.

1.11 Interpretive signage help define the historic Civil War site, Fort Negley, in Nashville, Tennessee.

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



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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 at the Port of Los Angeles.

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.



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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.



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

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 surrounding it. And because the intent of all that signage is to communicate, Times Square does represent placemaking in an EGD sense.

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 express communication function, EGD plays a key—and increasingly recognized—role in how people use and experience the built environment.

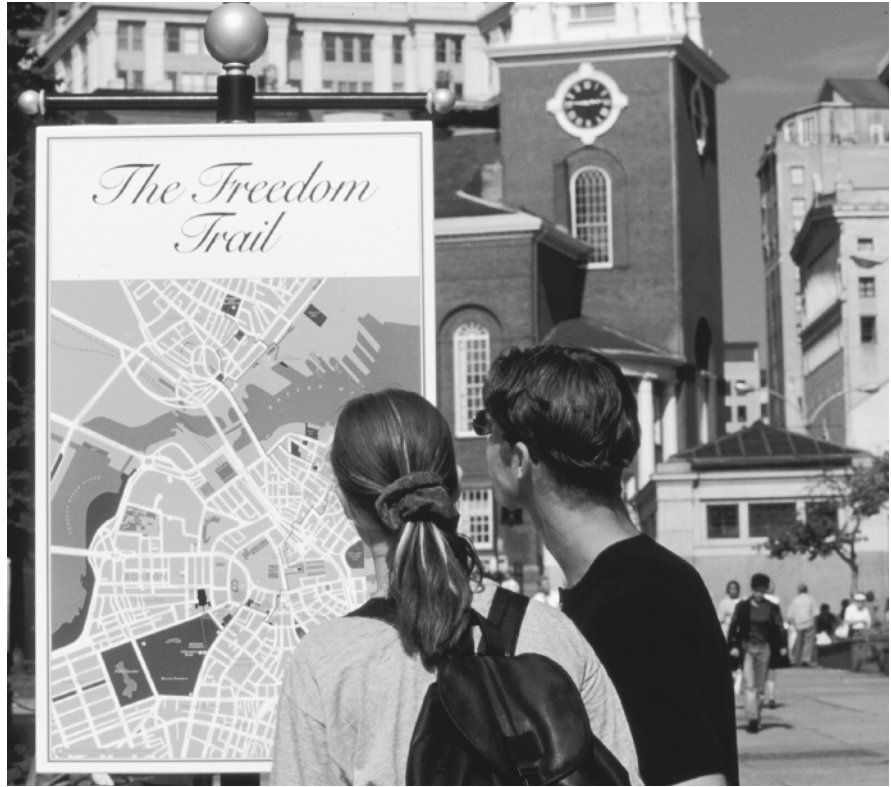
Furthermore, the signage and wayfinding aspect of EGD is being recognized more often as a key contributor to a sense of well-being, safety, and security in unfamiliar and often high-stress environments, such as airports, hospitals, and cities. Additionally, EGD is gaining importance for its capability to create a sense of place for a given site and for its power to reinforce a brand image.

Once considered a necessary evil—or worse, an afterthought—a growing number of people in the design, construction, development, and policy arenas have gained an appreciation 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.

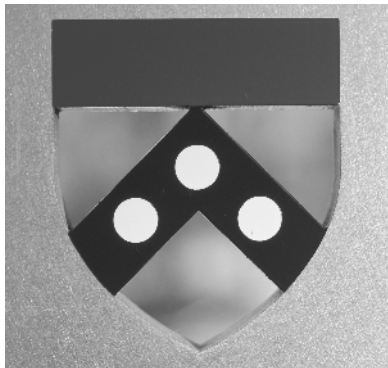
Certainly, EG designers are often part of the consultant team assembled by architects for a building design or renovation project, but signage and EG design has finally come into its own, as well. Cities and universities are engaging EG designers, sans architects, to create signage and other EG design programs. Real estate managers are engaging EG designers, sans architects, to spruce up the image of a building or facility. Even general contractors and construction 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 EG design have a unique branding power.



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1.16a, b The contemporary version of the University of Pennsylvania's crest brands every sign in its campuswide program.

1.17 Freedom Trail signage harmonizes with Boston's historical sites.

1.18 Signage at the Jacob Javitz Federal Building in Lower Manhattan integrates and harmonizes with contemporary architectural details.



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Signage and EGD on the Brand Bandwagon

Signage and EGD programs 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. 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.

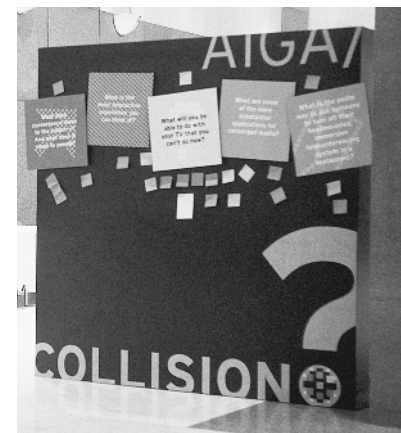
Using the imposition approach, signage can create or impose a unique, singular identity on a site—an identity that's completely independent of the site's visual characteristics. This approach works well for existing sites that have disparate visual elements, such as cities, college campuses, and transportation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

Whether a signage program brands by harmony or imposition, signage provides needed information to people using it, engendering feelings of goodwill and security. 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 relations with any given audience.

1.19 The metabrand image of the Amtrak Acela signage links diverse station architecture from Boston to Washington, DC.

1.20 The 1984 Los Angeles Olympics signage linked a wide array of remote venues by imposing a strong brand image distinctive of the city's spirit.

1.21 Signage for an AIGA conference imposes the event's theme onto the venue.



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You Can't Learn This in College

EGD projects are typically complex, with many problems and subproblems, which cross the boundaries of various design disciplines. Accordingly, EGD is a cross-disciplinary specialty field that combines aspects of the graphic design, architecture, and industrial and interior design professions. Currently, there are no known comprehensive EGD degree-granting programs in the United States, although certain design programs do offer students exposure to EGD in a specific course. These courses either may be exclusively dedicated to EGD or incorporate EGD within a broader course of study, such as a corporate identity design course.

Due to the lack of a comprehensive EGD educational program, and because of the cross-disciplinary nature of the field, the only way EGD practitioners can fill gaps in their knowledge base is by learning in the workplace. For example, a graphic designer must learn about three-dimensional forms and materials, working in scale, interpreting architectural drawings, and basic drafting. An architect must learn about graphic communication purposes and techniques, two-dimensional design principles, and graphic application techniques. This book aims to fill in those gaps for both aspiring and current practitioners, including students.

This book is also for clients who procure EGD services, including architects, landscape architects, urban designers, planners, public administrators, transportation officials, real estate developers, general contractors, and facility and construction managers. Design professionals, policymakers, developers, and managers who engage the services of environmental graphic designers will gain an understanding of EGD processes and methodologies, leading to a more effective working relationship with EG designers.

What's Ahead in This Book

This book will take you, the reader, into the wonderful world of EG design, with the focus on signage and wayfinding design. Think of it as a guidebook, which leads you first into the design process as it relates to EG design,

1.22 The spectrum of design disciplines and their products.

City Planning / Urban Design	Landscape Architecture	Architecture	Interior Design	Industrial Design	Graphic Design
Cities, Towns, Campuses	Planned Open Spaces, Parks	Buildings	Interior Spaces	Objects for Living & Work	Objects that Communicate

Macro

▶ Micro

then reveals what I call the Signage Pyramid methodology, which I developed in graduate school. This methodology divides signage into three interrelated focus areas or components: the Information Content System, the Graphic System, and the Hardware System. This divide-and-conquer strategy makes it easier to solve the complex problems and subproblems posed in the design of a comprehensive signage program. Along the way, you'll also find lots of tips, and a relatively small dose of opinion.

Ultimately, this book is about the design process and methodology that leads to the end product of a built, functioning signage program. Unfortunately, the book could not be printed in full color throughout, but I've made the best use of the 32-page color insert to showcase the built products of the process; in contrast, the black-and-white figures focus on aspects of the process itself. All the photos throughout the book, color and black-and-white, represent the work of my office, as well as that of several leading EGD consulting firms in the United States.

As you read, keep in mind that every signage and wayfinding project is different—different sites, different sizes, different clients, different everything! So the generalized, idealized process and methodology presented in this book won't directly mirror the process for each and every signage project an EG designer or client has encountered or will encounter. But though signage and wayfinding design is complex, it's not rocket science. There are few hard-and-fast rules, and there are many ways to approach many of the items discussed in this book. There's also a multitude of signage and wayfinding issues and technicalities that this book doesn't address. In sum, I recommend you use this as a big-picture book, then adapt what you learn to your own projects.