

'IT'S GOOD. YOU CAN IDENTIFY WHAT YOU WANT TO LOOK AT.'

Mother with her adult daughter in the Silver Galleries

A formative evaluation of plans for a sign scheme and map

prepared for the Victoria & Albert Museum

by the Holmes Wood Consultancy

This report was prepared for

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INTRODUCTION

A new signage system for the V&A, incorporating a paper map and gallery signs, was in the process of development prior to this formative evaluation study. The study was designed to test key components of the system as they are developed.

The study involved making twenty accompanied visits with visitors in a mocked up area of the museum (see Methodology).

The issues investigated, where possible, in each visit were:

- Legibility of the typeface
- Clarity of icons
- Satisfactory positioning of signs
- The meaningfulness of the notion of quarters (Asia, Europe, Materials & Techniques, Modern) and their colour coding
- Ability to identify location using the proposed system
- Ability to wayfind using the proposed system
- Clarity of the 'tube map' design of the maps
- Visitor understanding of the numbering of levels and rooms

The outcomes of the visits are reported in order under the above headings.

METHODOLOGY

Two areas on Levels 1 (main floor) and 3 were mocked up with the proposed signage system. All of the present signage in the areas was covered over.

The areas were the galleries to the north of the Pirelli Garden. On Level 1 they covered the Renaissance displays from the Ceramic Staircase to room 16a and included the Morris, Gamble and Poynter rooms and the various facilities, lifts and stairs opening off the gallery. On Level 3 the area above the mocked up Level 1 area included the Silver Galleries from the Ceramic Staircase to room 89, various facilities, lifts arriving from Level 1 and on to Levels 4 and 5 and stairs opening off the galleries towards the Lecture Theatre and Seminar Room.

The evaluation took place on Saturday 17 May and Sunday 18 May. On both days the V&A was full of visitors many of whom were attracted to the very popular Art Deco exhibition. As this temporary exhibition had timed tickets many people were strolling the galleries waiting to see it. Because of this the area on Level 1 at the base of the Ceramic staircase was exceptionally busy with people and only one visit started from this point.

The signage consultancy, Holmes Wood, provided material related to the map booklet, which was under development in order to test content with visitors.

This material consisted of an A3 sheet with exploded plans of the museum and seven A4 sheets individually printed with a Key to Icons and maps of floor levels

from 0 to 5&6. The sheets were colour printed and stapled together in the right hand corner. Hence, visitor did not trial map materials in a mocked up final format.

In order to facilitate the testing with visitors it was found to be most appropriate to cannibalise some of this material so that visitors could handle single pieces of information at a time: the exploded A3 sheet, the Key to Icons sheet and the Level 1 and Level 3 maps as appropriate.

Twenty accompanied visits were made with visitors being picked up anywhere in the mocked up areas. Each path varied according to where the path started and where the visitor agreed, or wanted, to go. All paths went via at least one type of toilet. One visit was made, by arrangement, with a wheel chair user and a detailed account of his journey is given as an appendix as it also covers more than signage. Five accompanied visits in each of four categories were made.

The four categories were:

- A. Testing Level 1 areas to varied Level 3, 4 & 5 destinations covering staircases, lift, lecture theatre, seminar room and toilet facilities on levels, 3,4 &5.
- B. Testing Level 3 areas to varied Level 1 destinations including the Gamble, Poynter and Morris rooms, toilet facilities, lift and staircases.

- C. Testing within Level 1 to varied destinations including two staircases, lift, Morris, Poynter and Gamble rooms and toilet facilities.

- D. Testing within Level 3 to varied destinations including lift, staircases, Lecture theatre, Seminar room, discovery areas, and range of toilets.

THE SAMPLE

The twenty visitor groups included four singletons, fourteen adult pairs and two family groups with both parents. In all thirty-six adults and three children tested the signage and maps. The children were especially asked to test the maps.

There were fourteen males, twenty-two females, a boy of ten years and girls of seven and eight in the sample.

The age ranges of the adult sample were as follows:

16-19 years = 1

20-24 = 1

25-34 = 6

35-44 = 15

45-54 = 4

55-64 = 5

65+ = 4

SUMMARY OF MATTERS OF SIGNIFICANCE

- The visitors did not trial maps in a mocked up final format.
- Only nine of the twenty visit parties (around half) were using the present V&A map when encountered. If this pattern is typical the directories will be very important indeed for a sizable sector of the audience.
- All maps and signs were rated easy to read. However, the maps were presented on A4 sheets in large type.
- Visitors queried the meaning of the icons indicating No Wheelchair Access, Lunch Room, Meeting Point, Restaurant, Canteen and Shop.
- Around a third of the groups found that signs were not in good positions when they needed them. Much of this is due to the architecture of the galleries.
- The notion of quarters and their colour coding was approved. A key to the colour coding on each map was suggested.
- Visitors could place themselves on the floor map but some did so rather slowly. The depiction of the garden space helped many to orientate themselves and some visitors suggested that it be emphasised on the final maps.
- A seven year old girl and, separately, an eight year old girl had no difficulty wayfinding after their actual position on the floor map was shown to them.
- The physical room numbering system is not noticed by visitors. The notion of 'Levels' is considered to be confusing.
- The 'tube map' design of maps was approved.

THE FINDINGS, WITH COMMENTARY

Map Usage

In the twenty visit situations only 9 of the overall visits being made that day were being conducted with the present V&A map which had been picked up by the visitors as they entered the museum.

Commentary

This finding indicates that very significant numbers of all visits to the V&A could be made without the aid of a hand held map. The signage on the floor will have to be very robust, in a communicative sense, for such people. Icons will need to be transparent and positioning of directories will be important for them. The room numbers are likely to be meaningless to this group of visitors.

Legibility of typeface on maps, signs and directories

Visitors were asked if the maps and signs were easy to read. In all twenty instances they said YES. The directories visitors were asked to comment on were at the top of the Ceramic Staircase and in the Lift areas.

Visitor comments included:

V4. Good font. It's all self-explanatory. They tell you everything you want. The directory is good. The map is OK if you use the gallery numbers.

V5. I like the font.

V6. The directory is OK.

V7. The black bar (on the directory at the top of the Ceramic Staircase) does not mean anything to me.

V9. The black (on directory at Level 1 lift) just looks like part of the design. It would be better to say 'You are here'.

Commentary

Visitors appear to find the typeface and font sizes to be satisfactory. However, it must be remembered that the visitors were handling quite large, detailed, individual floor maps in A4 format. If the maps were reduced in size they might become less legible. Visitors will probably learn that the black bar on directories indicates the Level position.

Clarity of Icons

Clarity is here taken to mean communication of meaning as well as visual clarity. Visitors were handed the A4 sheet with the Key to Icons on it at the start of the visit and asked to say if there were any that they did not immediately understand. The interpretation of icons was also noted during accompanied visits. The A4 sheet presents the icons in a much larger format than on the A4 maps. The problematic icons are depicted below:

ICON	No. of problems
No wheelchairs	11

Lunch room	7
Meeting point	5
Restaurant	5
Canteen	4
Shop	3

Commentary

- The Tickets, Lift and Discovery Area icons were rejected by 1 person for each but this is not considered problematical.
- The failure to recognize No Wheelchair Access could be due to unfamiliarity. Visitors often said 'I suppose if you were in a wheel chair you would recognise it'. However, having been 'taught' the icon in this discussion two visit groups went on to fail to recognize it during their accompanied visit.
- The Lunch Room, Restaurant and Canteen were not recognized mainly for semantic reasons but there were also pictorial suspicions. The Lunch Room had to be explained as 'for school parties' and so visitors then said why not call it 'School Lunches'. The Restaurant icon may lack pictorial clarity. There was a semantic problem with Canteen. It may be the Staff Canteen during the week but the objecting visitors seemed to think that canteens were not for them at weekends and they did not think it an

appropriate title for the Morris, Gamble and Poynter Rooms. Maybe Tea Room would suit.

- The Meeting Point and Shop icons were not understood visually. The meeting point icon was considered too small and it was suggested that a flag would suffice. The shop icon was not read as a shopping bag by three people. Perhaps a basket might 'work'.

Satisfactory positioning of signs

When asked 'Were the signs in good positions when you needed them?' seven of the twenty visiting parties said NO.

Commentary

This high level of difficulty may be due specifically to the architecture of the gallery spaces where the testing took place. Within Level 1 the toilets, lifts and stairs are entered alongside short lengths of wall which jut out into the gallery space. Since the signs were on the wall near the appropriate doors they, and the doors, were obscured for those approaching from the 'wrong' side of the short wall. For example, when moving west along Level 1 from the east it is very easy to walk past the mahogany door which leads to the lift lobby. Maybe the door could be replaced with a glass one in sympathy with the lift lobby as this could make access more obvious? There is a similar location problem with the disabled toilet on this Level.

The following visit records illuminate this problem for both levels:

V2. Within L1, did not find the door to Lift K when walking from east.

V3. Within L1, nearly walked past door to lift lobby.

V20. Within L1, 'It's so easy to walk past the mahogany door.'

V8. Within L3, visitors in R8g, close to R6g, turned further back into R8g to locate the discovery area beside them in R6g. They expected to see a light bulb symbol in the area, didn't, and so ignored the space.

V9. L3 to L1, 'The door to the Lift K looks private. I would normally walk past it.'

V12. L1 to L3, visitors came up the Ceramic Staircase to urgently find a female toilet (L1 toilet was closed). They used the Directory panel at the top of these stairs, walked into the Silver Galleries and walked right past the signs to the toilets, went to the end of R8g, turned and were assisted.

V17. In L3 lift lobby, 'The lift sign on the Directory (L3) should be near the Level 3 items.'

The meaningfulness of the notion of quarters and their colour coding

The quarters were explained at the beginning of the accompanied visit when the visitors were first given the A3 exploded floor plan of the V&A. Towards the end of the visit, visitors were asked 'Are the quarters (shown by colours on maps and signs) a helpful way to think about getting round the collections of the V&A?'

All visitors approved of this way of describing the V&A gallery spaces. However, two said that the definition of the quarters – a key – should appear on each individual map. The responses were:

Helpful / Yes / OK = 9

A good idea = 8

Very good = 3

Visitor comments included:

V3. 'But put the explanation of the quarters on each individual level map.'

V4. 'You need them described on each map – this is a key need. I do like the idea very much indeed.'

V7. 'You can identify what you want to look at'.

V15. 'I love the colour system. It's really good – much simpler.'

Commentary

These visitors were taught the colour coding system at the beginning of their visit and they went from one unified coded area to another. In a sense, they were 'skilled' before questioning. It may be a helpful idea to give a colour key on each map for less privileged visitors.

Ability to identify location using the proposed system

At the initial meeting visitors were shown the exploded A3 plan and asked if they could show where they were in the building.

- Three groups of the twenty, all using the old system as they entered the testing spaces, were very lost and disorientated. One group was hopelessly lost, the second thought that they were on Level 1 when they were on Level 3 and the last thought that they were on Level 4 when they were on Level 3 (the man in the group had been counting the flights of stairs they climbed).

- Twelve of the twenty visit parties could locate themselves on the expanded map.

After this test visitors were asked to place their location on the relevant floor level map.

- Six parties of the twenty could instantly place themselves exactly.
- The remaining fourteen groups could place themselves after a little time. Some obviously found it easier if they could place themselves in relation to the garden (they looked for it first), especially on Level 3. Others had to be helped by pointing out that there were numbers high on the walls of the galleries.

Commentary

Many people find reading maps very difficult indeed and museum buildings are very complex and, so, museum maps can be difficult. These visitors probably did very well. Museum visitor research carried out in the 1980's by Dr. Stephen Griggs at the Natural History Museum, indicated that visitors tend to steer themselves through museum spaces using topographical markers – distinctive exhibits or parts of the building – rather than by the use of conceptual or semantic markers. This would seem to be the case here as so many people looked for the garden space on the individual map first and then located themselves or confirmed their location decision with a later reference to the garden space. People often turned the map so that they were orientated. Three visitor groups suggested that that a garden symbol (a tree or a flower or the

word garden) should appear on all level maps along with the colour green (which only appears on the Level 1 map).

Ability to wayfind using the proposed system of directories, signs and maps

Commentary

The main problem people had was with physical barriers to finding their way. These have been explicitly described above in the discussion on positioning of signs. The heavy, imposing mahogany doors to the lift lobby and associated facilities on Levels 1 and 3 were a psychological barrier to some visitors. They do look private. These doors were never a problem when coming from the 'lobby side' on Levels 1, 3, 4 and 5 because they are painted on that side to conform to the light airy decorative scheme of the area.

The Level 3 map has an erroneous baby change symbol on it which was revealed during wayfinding.

The room numbering system was rarely used by visitors. It may be too high above their heads.

The clarity of the 'tube map' design of the individual maps

Visitors were asked 'Is it a good map' after they had used a relevant floor map.

They all approved as the following responses show:

Yes = 11

OK = 5

Very good = 3

It's legible = 1.

Positive comments included :

V6. 'No problem. The green for the garden is good'

V7 & V10. 'It's easy to use / read.'

V12. 'It works'

V16. 'The numbers are to follow.'

V20. 'It's good for getting directions.'

However, some visitors, while approving of the individual maps in general were a little critical of what they saw as excessive detail:

V16. 'I quite like the old one, too.'

V18. 'It's a bit over the top. This old one is a better size and with not too much on it.'

The final test of the 'tube map' design was given by the two girls in the family groups as the following wayfind paths show:

V14. 7 year old girl. The girl read the Level 3 map, was told where she was by her mother, and took the interviewer, her mother, father and her brother out from R69 via Lift K to Level 1.

V19. 8 year old girl. Read the map in R 12 on Level 1 and took the interviewer, her mother and father via Lift K to the Level 5 toilets (which they all used) and then back down again.

Visitor understanding of the numbering of levels and rooms

Commentary

LEVELS

It is suspected that visitors did find the numbering of levels very odd, especially when they were asked to go to the floor above or below and there was no Level 2 in between. Because they were with someone whom they thought of as a V&A person they probably felt 'safe'. When they asked about it, it was explained that the building had varied levels because it was built at differing times and they seemed to accept that as an explanation. In this study, one visitor said 'Level 5 is an odd idea. You think it is a floor (from maps)'. Level 5 is the landing entrance to the upper tier of the Lecture Theatre so the visitor did have a point. Visitors will probably find the numbering of levels situation more confusing than was revealed here when they are visiting the entire museum later on.

ROOM NUMBERS

None of the twenty groups instinctively steered themselves round by room numbers. Most people did not notice them on the walls and had to have their existence pointed out. They may learn to look for and use them as they learn to use the maps when on unaccompanied visits.

APPENDIX

An arranged accompanied wheelchair visit with an adult male.

This itinerary is presented as a list of stops. All the relevant study data has been presented in the rest of this report along with that of the other nineteen accompanied visits. It is presented here because it includes additional information of interest to an access officer. The visit was arranged by Barry Ginley, the V&A disability officer and was the first accompanied visit undertaken.

1. We started at the foot of the Ceramic Staircase. The visitor could not locate himself on the exploded A3 plan.
2. The visitor looked at the Key to Icons and did not recognize the No Wheelchair Access icon.
3. The visitor was given the sheaf of maps (later, visitors were only given relevant ones) which he kept on his lap. He usually uses a map when he visits a museum. He is usually with a helping friend but this time we pretended he was alone. It was recognised that wheel chair visits are slower than walking visits so maps are studied very carefully. This visit took 1 hour 15 minutes. The visitor recognised his position by the number 11 sign on the wall.
4. The visitor wanted to find the disabled toilet on Level 1. He went right past the disabled toilet sign and suggests it should be placed on the other wall.

5. We entered the Victorian toilet which has been adapted for disabled visitors only. There is a long passage in and one turning space apart from the first toilet. The second toilet would not take a wheelchair.
6. The suitable toilet had a red emergency cord which had been thrown up onto a windowsill by the cleaners and so was out of the visitor's reach. As he opened the door to the toilet I noticed that it hit the light bulb in the passage and set it swinging. This was reported to a duty officer.
7. As we left the toilet I noted that the door was very difficult for the visitor to open and pass through. You need to be very strong to do it from a wheelchair and this man seemed to be strong and fit. We tested entry and exit again, completely unaided. The visitor commented that he could manage but an automatic door would be best. He also said that the display cabinet beside the door to the disabled toilet should never be moved any closer to the door than it is as present.
8. The visitor suggested that the Room sign 16A should be on the wall opposite the door so that disabled visitors don't go into 16A to look for the toilet. (This will need to be checked for accuracy of reportage)
9. In R12 the visitor said that he would need to have the sign back where the old one was in order for him to be able to find his way easily.
10. The visitor took us to the Lift Lobby after looking at the Morris, Poynter and Gamble rooms.
11. At the Lift directory he queried why the black strip was at the top when there was another black strip 'with lots of stuff'.
12. The Level 4 disabled toilet was rated 'one of the best I have seen'.

13. The Level 3 toilet was rated 'Very good'.
14. The visitor commented that when you come out of the L3 lift K there is no number to say where you are.
15. The visitor was the first to mention the need for a symbol for the garden – a flower was suggested.
16. We moved again. The visitor noted that the sign on Stair U for Level 4 should say 'Disabled access to the Lecture theatre via Lift K.
17. On the day of testing, there was a conference in the lecture theatre and there were three staffed tables spread across the landing under the windows. They were for registration, publications and tea and coffee. The visitor went from the lift lobby across the landing, in front of the tables, to test access to the Lecture Theatre door. In order to return to the lift lobby he had to turn the wheelchair in a very tight space, in front of a table and at the top of a downward flight of stairs. This looked potentially very dangerous.
18. We returned to Level 1 after touring the silver galleries and moving in all possible area on Levels 4 & 5. I noted, again, that it was very difficult to get out of the door on L1 from the Lift K lobby. Strength and dexterity is required.