

Experiencing an Unknown City: Environmental Features as Pedestrian Wayfinding Clues through the City of Swansea, UK

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Abstract : In today's globally-driven modern cities diverse groups of new visitors face various challenges when attempting to find their desired location if culture and language are barriers. The most common way-showing tools such as directional and identificational signs are the most problematic and their usefulness can be limited or even non-existent. It is argued new methods should be implemented that could support or replace such conventional literacy and language dependent way-finding aids. It has been concluded in recent research studies that local urban features in complex pedestrian spaces are worthy of further study in order to reveal if they do function as way-showing clues. Some researchers propose a more comprehensive approach to the complex perception of buildings, façade design and surface patterns, while some have been questioning whether we necessarily need directional signs or can other methods deliver the same message but in a clearer manner for a wider range of users. This study aimed to test to what extent do existent environmental and urban features through the city center area of Swansea in the UK facilitate the way-finding process of a first time visitor. The three-hour experiment was set to attempt to find 11 visitor attractions ranging from recreational, historical, educational and religious locations. The challenge was attempting to find as many as possible when no prior geographical knowledge of their whereabouts was established. The only clues were 11 pictures representing each of the locations that had been acquired from the city of Swansea official website. An iPhone and a heart-rate tracker wristwatch were used to record the route was taken and stress levels, and take record photographs of destinations or decision-making points throughout the journey. This paper addresses: current limitations in understanding the ways that the physical environment can be intentionally deployed to facilitate pedestrians while finding their way around, without or with a reduction in language dependent signage; investigates visitor perceptions of their surroundings by indicating what urban elements manifested an impact on the way-finding process. The initial findings support the view that building facades and street features, such as width, could facilitate the decision-making process if strategically employed. However, more importantly, the anticipated features of a specific place construed from a promotional picture can also be misleading and create confusion that may lead to getting lost.

Keywords : pedestrian way-finding, environmental features, urban way-showing, environmental affordance

Conference Title : ICAUD 2017 : International Conference on Advanced Urban Design

Conference Location : Paris, France

Conference Dates : July 20-21, 2017