



# The Verbs of Place

## BRANDING, PLACEMAKING AND WAYFINDING

by Rachel Downey

Branding, Placemaking and Wayfinding. What on earth do these terms mean and what value do they bring to a community? While they sound like buzzwords, each represents a deep area of practice and expertise that can help communities identify and promote who they are, align and attract residents, businesses and visitors, bringing purpose and function to their district. Translating to real return on investment, the meaning of these words is worth getting to know.

### DEFINING BRANDING

**Brand** is a symbolic embodiment of all the information connected to a product, company or place, and serves to create associations and expectations around it. A Brand Identity is not a logo alone, but the collective look and feel of your organization's communications materials. This often includes a logo, fonts, color schemes, patterns, photo style, symbols and even sound, which may be developed to represent implicit values, ideas and personality.

A **Brand Image** however, is much broader as it is the collective perception, planned or incidental, of a product, company or place and is the result of every interaction a user has with that product or company or place. This includes interactions with the people, environment, materials, and messages associated with the product, company or place.

### DEFINING PLACEMAKING

**Placemaking** is the effort and results of a community of people coming together to build a destination for sharing, communicating and enjoying each other and their environment. It is premised on inclusion and involvement from the people who make up that community - government, community development organizations, residents and businesses. Each brings their own set of challenges and perspectives that make up the collective whole.

Successful places are authentic and reflect the true values and assets of that collective community and communicate those values through the visual expression and physical programming. This helps visitors develop expectations around that place and helps to match those expectations with actual positive experiences that they have there.

### DEFINING WAYFINDING

**Wayfinding** is literally, helping people find their way, through signage and other visual clues. Wayfinding is a critical component in developing positive experiences—when people feel oriented, comfortable and safe, they can enjoy themselves and let go to experience the unique attributes of their environment. Signage can also carry brand messaging—a quality of materials, colors and look and feel—that further enhance the experience and provide clues into the culture and characteristics of a place.

### OVERVIEW

While each of these three disciplines are defined as unique, when used in concert, they complement and reinforce each other. They should functionally and aesthetically work to inform your brand strategy, marketing approach, physical place and user experience.

### LET'S GET REAL

**Authenticity**, like many words, is often tossed around without giving it the right thought and credit. What does it mean to create an authentic place? And if you are deliberately creating it, is it still authentic?

My Mac Dashboard's Oxford Dictionary uses these two definitions of *authentic*:

*made or done in the traditional or original way, or in a way that faithfully resembles an original*

*relating to or denoting an emotionally appropriate, significant, purposive and responsible mode of human life*

These are the keys to creating authentic places—they are real, they are purposeful, they provoke emotion and they are human. Great public spaces are places that the people who live and work there are committed to. They believe in it, they are proud of it and they contribute to it. In turn, those that visit can quickly gain a sense of what the community stands for, perhaps they are attracted to the history, the culture, the blend of retail shops or the style of architecture. What's important is that isn't everything to everyone. It is a unique combination of attributes that together, make a unique experience. One that appeals to many people for different reasons, but is founded on reality.

#### **FUNCTION FIRST**

Good design puts function first. By understanding how the community wants to use a place and by aiding in that use and comprehension of space, you start with a solid framework on which to put your form. Focus on the things that can make a difference with how people are interacting with their environment, starting with the elimination of things that cause frustration.

No one likes the feeling of being lost. I would venture to say it is one

of the worst feelings - it activates fear, anxiety, confusion and loss of control. While the people who live in your city may know where to park, what about visitors? If they have a bad experience, will they come back again? A good vehicular wayfinding system helps people feel in control. It directs people into your area, announces arrival, directs to parking and key destinations and helps them get back out again.

A step further is a pedestrian program. It picks up people once they have gotten out of their car or departed public transportation and lets them know not only where their intended destination is, but what else the area has to offer. It invites them to stay a while, or make a promise to come back.

Another layer to this can be an interpretive program. Signs that tell stories, that self-direct a walking tour, that announce historical or relevant points of interest. This builds on the experience people have with a place, creating emotional connections that will warrant reliving or telling others.

Design comes in on all levels of signage and streetscaping. Each choice of material, color, scale and design can help further define the story of your place, reflecting its authentic brand essence.

#### **WHO'S WHO**

No one knows their community better than the people who live and work there. They have made

a commitment and have a vested interest in its success. At the same time, each individual comes with his or her own point of view, their own issues and opinions and own emotional connections to the past or place. Throw in the necessity of governance, budgets and zoning and you have quite an entanglement of needs. This is why it is beneficial to work with a planning consultant or other specialized consultant who can take an objective and holistic view, consolidate aligned and opposing desires and work harmoniously through an established process. They should balance the need for a platform of engagement and inclusion while maintaining an objective and experienced eye on the end goals.

#### **WHY AGAIN?**

In a society inundated with marketing messages, choices and fierce competition for the mighty dollar, how does a community stand apart? And when those dollars are especially hard to come by, in a climate such as today's economy, why would you spend it on logos, signs and messages? The answer is easy—return on investment. Projects for Public Places (PPC at [www.ppc.org](http://www.ppc.org)) is a non-profit organization that supports communities that strive to build a place that attracts talent, residents, businesses and economic growth. Time and time again, project after project, the proof turns up in the pudding. The investments communities make in freshening up their streetscapes, developing wayfinding systems, creating connections through storytelling and interpretive walks and developing programming that invites people onto the streets, translates into more dollars. And the intangibles, such as sense of community pride and sense of belonging, can be a catalyst of change for many years to come. ■

#### **About the Author**

Rachel Downey, Principal Design Consultant, Studio Graphique  
[rachel@studiographique.com](mailto:rachel@studiographique.com)

As principal and founder of Studio Graphique, a branding consultancy and environmental graphic design firm, Rachel is the resident visionary for the organization and its staff. She has established the philosophy, direction and culture of the firm which is a highly collaborative and creative environment focused on improving life experiences and opportunities for the immediate community and beyond. Rachel holds a BFA in Visual Communication Design from Kent State University and is a graduate of the Cleveland Bridge Builders, a year-long program for aspiring leaders. She has studied at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland and is certified in Reiki I. Rachel resides in South Euclid, Ohio with her son Simon, 5, and husband Jason, an architect.