Seamless Seattle

Building a wayfinding system
for walking in the Emerald City

Seattle
Department of
Transportation

What is wayfinding?

Many world-class cities have developed wayfinding systems. The best provide information that connects different transportation modes, make walking a real and more attractive option, encourage visitors to explore more, and support local businesses by opening up hidden or out-of-mind routes and neighborhoods.

Everyone has been lost at one time so we all know how stressful it can be not to know your way. Cities can be particularly challenging places to navigate and we use a lot of tools to understand them including our previous knowledge, our understanding of the arrangement of buildings, streets and landmarks, and various information. Together these tools help make a complex place easy to understand or more 'legible'.

Cities that are not very legible create a number of problems. First, they increase the chances that people will get lost. Second, they reduce awareness of opportunities to use different modes of travel, such as transit. Third, they deter us from exploring, which means visitors stay in the tourist hotspots and new residents don't build a knowledge of their city.
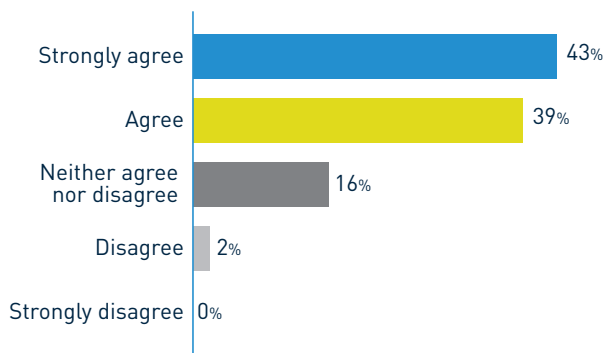
While it is difficult to change the arrangement of cities to make them more physically legible, it is possible to solve many of the problems by intelligently designing information to help people navigate more easily and to walk as part of longer journeys with transit or other services. Wayfinding projects include traditional signs and maps, but also extend to digital systems, public art and landscaping.

Translink Vancouver (right) and Legible London (far right) have set the standard for transportation and pedestrian wayfinding systems, respectively.
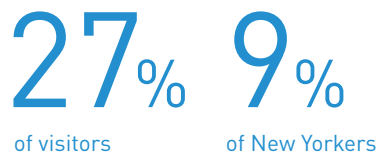
Why does Seattle need a wayfinding project?

To meet its growth and transportation aims, the City of Seattle has committed to increasing the percentage of trips made by walking to 35% by 2035. To achieve this ambitious aim, the City prepared a Pedestrian Master Plan in June 2017 that included a strategy to develop a coordinated wayfinding system (Strategy 5.2).

Wayfinding would not only make walking a simpler choice for many journeys, it would also help connect other transportation services that rely on pedestrian access. By increasing the awareness of walking as an option and the confidence that a walking journey will be supported, a wayfinding project is expected to help improve the walkability and accessibility of Seattle.

More people choosing to walk is not only good for people's health and the environment, it is an important option for managing transportation demands, especially during the current period of growth and change.

GOOD WAYFINDING ENCOURAGES WALKING

Strongly agree	43%
Agree	39%
Neither agree nor disagree	16%
Disagree	2%
Strongly disagree	0%

A study from Vancouver, BC in 2012 (City of Vancouver) found that 82% of people interviewed agreed or strongly agreed they were more likely to walk between places because of new street walking maps.

LOST IN NEW YORK

27% of visitors   **9%** of New Yorkers

27% of visitors & 9% of New Yorkers admitted to having been lost in the previous week, in a study conducted in January 2011 (I Walk New York).

MOTIVATIONS TO INCREASE WALKING

If there were more facilities in my local area
- 2008: 60%
- 2007: 60%

If the pavements were cleaner
- 2008: 59%
- 2007: 58%

If I had better information on walks
- 2008: 57%
- 2007: 54%

If there were more shops in my local area
- 2008: 54%
- 2007: 54%

If I had a better knowledge of London generally
- 2008: 49%
- 2007: 47%

If there were more other people out walking
- 2008: 48%
- 2007: 42%

If I knew how many calories it would burn
- 2008: 38%
- 2007: 34%

Other
- 2008: 0%
- 2007: 3%

None of these
- 2008: 6%
- 2007: 12%

In the UK, a 2008 study (Transport for London) revealed that 57% of Londoners said they would be motivated to walk more if provided with information on local walks. The study also found that 26% were worried about getting lost when walking.

Base: Londoners

■ 2008 (n=1002)
■ 2007 (n=1002)

Source: Q10

Isn't there an app for that?

There are lots of digital maps and navigation apps that people use everyday for free. The growth of digital information raises the question why can't Seattleites simply rely on their smartphone for wayfinding? And indeed they can - many of these apps are great, but they do present some compromises.

For one, they are rarely consistent with other types of information that people rely on such as street signs and printed maps. This can create the increasingly common problem of people trying to relate the information on a small screen to the streets around them.

They are also often based on global platforms meaning individual authorities have little ability to influence how their city is shown or described. The automation of commercial apps mean they often miss important details that influence the decision to walk such as hills, the location of steps, crosswalks and traffic-free routes.

The City of Seattle wayfinding program will create a system of information that is all about Seattle, defined by its own priorities, owned by the city, and which can be shared by all the communities who can make use of it.
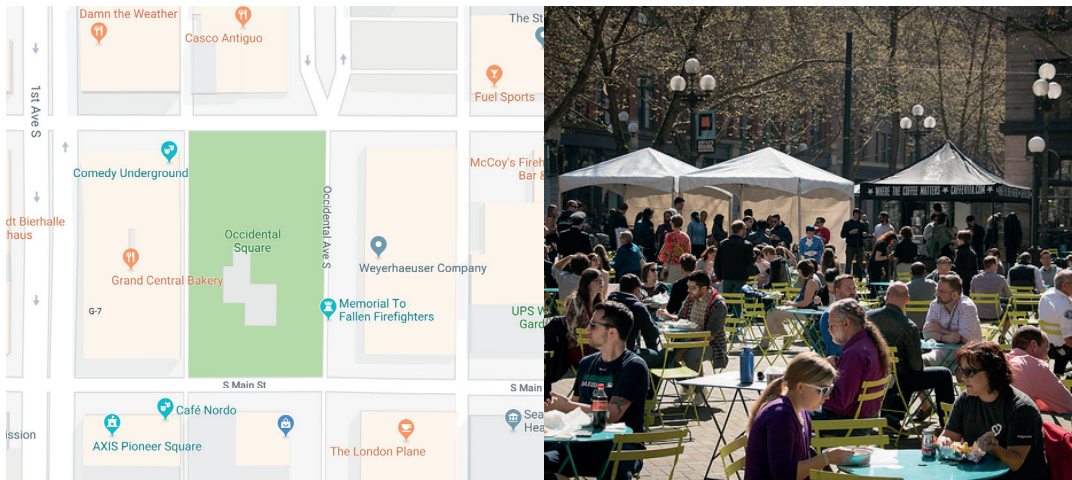
Google maps shows Occidental Square as a generic green space. In reality it is one of Seattle's most active public squares and an attractive route for walking.

Technology is great but can still be challenging to use in the real world.

What is happening?

Over the next year to June 2019, the City of Seattle is working with a team of specialist wayfinding planners and designers to create a city-wide pedestrian wayfinding system. The outcome of the project will be a pilot project, a set of design standards and proposals for roll-out across the city.

This project is funded by a WSDOT Transit Coordination Grant, and has agency support from Seattle Department of Transportation, King County Metro, Sound Transit, Pierce Transit, Community Transit, and the Downtown Seattle Association.

Throughout the year-long project, the project team will involve communities, local businesses, and tourism organizations to discuss what information people need to encourage them to walk and the benefits that a coordinated wayfinding system could produce.

While the opportunity is clear, the process is complicated. Many parts of the city are already covered with a lot of signs, and some agencies and communities have already invested in their own wayfinding. To make this project successful, a lot of work is needed to understand how a coordinated system of information can meet the needs of all the groups who have an interest while providing the simple, accessible and affordable system that users need to make walking a choice.

How can I find out more?

For more information go to www.seattle.gov and search for 'pedestrian wayfinding,' or email wayfinding@seattle.gov

The project is being led by SDOT.

Seattle Department of Transportation