

Design Perspectives

MMST 11003

Lesson 2

DESIGN AND INFORMATION

- Introduction
- How we see
- Color
- Form
- Depth
- Movement
- What does this mean for multimedia design?
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• Introduction

Design often has to communicate clearly and quickly. For instance, motorists have only a few seconds to understand signs on the highway. Edward Tufte, in his fascinating book *Visual Explanations: Images and Quantities, Evidence and Narrative*, shows how bad design caused the Challenger space craft to crash. He doesn't mean the design of the infamous O-rings; he means the design of the information that was given to the people responsible for making the launch decision. The charts and graphs were so complicated that even these highly educated professionals found it difficult to see what they were trying to communicate—with tragic results. (1)

Activity 1

For an overview off Edward Tufte's work and ideas, see "Web page design inspired by Edward Tufte":

- <http://staff.washington.edu/larryg/Classes/Rinflux/zz-influx.html>

What does this have to do with multimedia design? Well, your design has to engage people and give them pleasure, and the most immediate way to do that is through its visual impact. And, once you've grabbed your audience's attention, they need to be able to find their way around your site or computer game or whatever it is—your design has to be able to guide people before they get frustrated or bored. You need, therefore, to know something about how people see, and how they process the information in order to understand their visual environment. Many web sites are confusing, and the viewer's pleasure soon disappears—and often the viewer disappears as well! A computer game, an encyclopedia on CD-ROM—in fact, any multimedia product—will also frustrate players if it doesn't have a visual and functional logic.

(1) Tufte, Edward R., *Visual Explanations: Images and Quantities, Evidence and Narrative*, Cheshire, Connecticut: Graphics Press, 1997, p27

Activity 2

These present bad Websites. See if you agree with their choices.

- <http://www.webtomorrow.com/badsites.htm>
- <http://www.fixingyourwebsite.com/mysterymeat.html>

This lesson will look at information design on road signs, which drivers have to absorb quickly and accurately. This will provide some clues about how people process information.

• How we see

Basically, our eyes collect light rays, which stimulate the retina at the back of the eye. But this does not indicate how extremely sensitive our eyes are. In fact, “[m]ore than 70 percent of all the sensory receptors in the human body are in the eyes.” The other senses—hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching—*together* only account for 30 percent of receptors. (2)

But to take advantage of the abilities of these sensitive organs, a designer needs to remember the way they work. Humans, with their forward-facing eyes, have a particular field of vision that differs from other animals with eyes on the side of their head.

Humans with a normal field of vision can comfortably see about 90 degrees to the left and 90 degrees to the right and about 80 degrees up and 80 degrees down. . . . The field of vision is divided into two sections: the foveal and the peripheral fields.

The *foveal field* is responsible for the most acutely focused detail in the eye. Under normal lighting conditions, it brings objects into the sharpest focus possible so that the brain can concentrate and analyze the visual image. The foveal field, however, represents only a 2 degree angle of coverage. Consequently, the object under scrutiny by the foveal field is about the size of the letter “e” [approximately 10 points] on [a] printed page. You must consciously move your eyes directly off an object in low light in order to see it because the foveal field doesn’t function well when there is little light. (3)

Because the viewer’s foveal vision can focus on a small area only, all the information on a road sign needs to be placed so that drivers speeding past can read it. The drivers don’t have the time to move their eyes all over the sign. Information will therefore usually be centered on the sign.

Also, because foveal vision can only function when there is lots of light, lights will be positioned on important signs, and reflective paints will be used so that the signs appear well-lit.

The outside edge of the eye is the *peripheral field*. An evolutionary holdover that protects the body from possibly harmful actions, it is the least developed field. The peripheral field does not see colors well, cannot see objects with much clarity, but is sensitive to slight movements by other people or objects. (4)

You may have seen the signs used on freeways made of moving lights that direct motorists into a different lane, for example when road works are being carried out. The movement of the lights will attract peripheral vision, even when the driver is focused on the road ahead.

After the eye collects light, the electronic impulses from the retina are then transmitted to the brain. Your eyes don’t actually understand what you see; it’s your brain that sorts and makes sense of everything: “The brain processes images as four basic visual perception cues (color, form, depth, and movement).” (5)

Let’s look at these.

• Color

Activity 3

Check out this excellent site that deals with color, “Color Matters” at:

(2) Lester, Paul Martin, *Visual Communication: Images with Messages* (2nd ed), Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 2000, p13

(3) Adapted from Lester, p15

(4) Adapted from Lester, p15

(5) Lester, p25

- <http://www.colormatters.com>

You may be especially interested in reading the recent short article here which deals with using color for e-commerce.

Colors do more than simply decorate. For example, some colors attract attention by seeming to literally “stand out”: “Painters have known for years that the warm colors—reds and yellows—appear closer than cool colors—blues and greens.” (6)

Color’s ability to bring things forward or push them back can be used in information design. Some signs have red or yellow backgrounds, which appear to push them towards the viewer—“STOP” signs, for example. Highway signs are often dark green with white letters. The letters appear clear and easy to read, because the green background seems to recede.

Color can also provoke emotional responses. See, for example, the discussion on “Drunk Tank Pink” in the “Colour Matters” website above. As Lester writes, “Color, more than any other attribute of [an] . . . image, produces emotional responses from the viewer. Color therefore is a highly subjective and powerful means of communicating ideas.” (7)

The result of the audience’s response to color can change the response to the message itself: “A person’s mental state or association with a colored object,” continues Lester, “strongly affects the emotional response of the message.” (8)

Because color—more than any other visual attribute—has the capacity to affect the emotions of the viewer, a message may be forever remembered or forever lost, depending on how it is utilized. For that reason, pay particular attention to the use of colors in graphic design . . . Color easily draws attention to itself. (9)

Color responses are also culturally based; white might have associations with brides in the western world but in many Asian cultures, red is the bridal color.

On signs, however, red tends to be connected with danger, and is used on stop signs and signs warning of hazards.

The emotional effects of color are *subjective*, but color can be described *objectively* by describing it as a mixture of lights of various wavelengths. You can see this in the color palettes of computer programs such as Photoshop, where you can mix colors by specifying percentages of yellow, magenta, cyan and black (which happen to be the four colors of ink used for most color printing).

Color can also be described *comparatively*: “the color red, for example, would be compared to the color of blood.” (10) This association tends to make red appropriate on stop and hazard signs.

Other terms that can be used in comparing colors are brightness and lightness. (11)

Activity 4

Read the article, “Disney World Signage,” by Steven Heller and Karen Pomeroy (*Design Literacy*, New York: Allworth Press, 1997, pp177-80), provided as a supplemental reading at the end of this lesson.

How many colors were used on the highway signs at Disney World, and what were they?

What guided the color choices that designers made?

As described in the article, were the choices subjective or objective?

What colors would you chose?

• Form

What is meant by “form”? “Form defines the outside edges and the internal parts of an object and has three parts: *dots, lines, and shapes.*” (12)

But, as Lester explains, it’s not just the form but where it’s placed and what else is around it

(6) Lester, p30

(7) Lester, p28

(8) Lester, p30

(9) Lester, p30

(10) Lester, p28

(11) Lester, p28

(12) Lester, p31

that makes it meaningful.

The *dot* . . . simply is a filled-in circle A dot anywhere within a framed space demands immediate attention Moved to the center, the dot becomes the hub of a wheel. If off to one side in a frame, the dot creates tension as the layout appears out of balance. Two dots within a framed space also create tension as the viewer is forced to divide attention between the two objects. (13)

Lines, whether straight or curved or in combination, have an energy that comes from the sequence of individual dots. Hence lines almost always evoke an emotion in the viewer.

According to anthropologist Evelyn Hatcher, straight lines convey a message of stiffness and rigidity. Straight lines can be horizontal, vertical, or diagonal.

Horizontal lines, especially when low in the frame, remind viewers of a horizon with plenty of room to grow. If the horizontal line is high in the frame, the viewer feels confined, as the layout seems heavy.

In a layout, vertical lines bring the eye of the viewer to a halt. The eye seems to travel around the space created by the line.

Diagonal lines have a strong, stimulating effect in a field of view. The most restful diagonal line is one that extends from the top right to the lower left corner of a frame. It is a perfect compromise between horizontal and vertical forces. Any other diagonal line moves the eye of the viewer in the line's direction. Several diagonal lines within a composition create a nervous dynamic energy.

Curved lines convey a mood of playfulness, suppleness, and movement. Curves have a gracefulness about them that softens the content of their active message.

If lines are thick and dark, their message is strong and confident. If thin and light with a clear separation between them, their mood is delicate, perhaps a bit timid. (14)

A road sign may seem at first to be completely without emotional impact, but as Lester points out, "If lines are thick and dark, their message is strong and confident. If thin and light with a clear separation between them, their mood is delicate, perhaps a bit timid" (15). Thus, the thick lines making up the letters and arrows of a road sign are "strong and confident" messages to drivers. There is nothing ambivalent about "SPEED LIMIT 60."

Grouped lines form blank spaces that the eyes naturally want to inspect. When drawn or as part of an object, they also simulate the sensation of touch. . . .

A smooth surface has few lines that mark its coating. Texture stimulates the tactile sense through memory. For example, previous experience with the sharp points of the needles of a cactus transfers to a picture of the plant. (16)

The third type of form, *shapes*, is the combination of dots and lines into patterns that occur throughout nature and in graphic design. . . . A shape that is quickly recognized is clearly separated from the background of the image.

The three basic shapes are *parallelograms, circles, and triangles*.

Parallelograms are four-sided figures with opposite sides that are parallel and equal in length, such as squares and rectangles.

A square, with its formally balanced, symmetrical orientation, is the most dull and conventional shape. But strength also comes from its plain appearance. A square is considered sturdy and straightforward. . . . (17)

Rectangles are the most common and are the favored shape of the frame for mediate images [that is, images in the media]. . . .

Circles have always been associated with the endless rhythmic patterns of time, symbolizing eternity without clear beginnings or endings. . . .

Triangles are the most dynamic and active of shapes. As energetic objects, they convey

(13) Lester, p31

(14) Adapted from Lester, pp31-2

(15) Lester, p32

(16) Adapted from Lester, p32

(17) Lester, pp32-3

direction, but they can burden a design with the tension they can create. . . . All three sides of an equilateral triangle are the same length. Its shape conveys a serene mood because of symmetrical balance. . . .

In contrast, the isosceles triangle draws its power . . . from its sharp point. . . . pointed in any direction, isosceles triangles challenge the eye to follow. (18)

Our ability to recognize dots, lines and forms is what enables us to read letters in the Roman alphabet (that is, this one). If the viewers need to grab a text message quickly, the typeface should be as simple as possible, to allow the viewer to see the circles and lines.

That's why road signs use:

1. Sans serif typefaces (the lines of the letters are plain and all parts are the same width, making the shapes easier to see);
2. Lots of space around the words (so that nothing gets in the way of the letters);
3. Colors that contrast strongly;
4. A hierarchy of information, so that it can be grasped quickly and understood easily (for example, a highway sign will give the highway name first, then milages to destinations.)

Activity 5

Look at the logo for the Commonwealth Bank of Australia at:

- <http://www.commbank.com.au>

What shape is it?

What colors does it use?

Do you agree (or disagree) that it is much more interesting and dynamic because it has been tipped on an angle?

What does that small black area add? Or do you think it doesn't add anything?

And what can you say about the thick lines of the typeface?

Can you think of any other very simple logos that seem to be using some of these same principles to communicate quickly?

Do you feel they are successful or unsuccessful?

Activity 6

This is the website for Seton, a company that manufactures signs, tapes and other safety gear:

- http://www.seton.net.au/index_signs_labels.cfm

These signs conform to health and safety specifications. Look particularly at Warning Signs, Prohibition Signs, Fire Signs, and First Aid Signs.

Look at the colors, the typefaces used, and the shapes—parallelograms, circles and triangles. Do they communicate the kinds of things Lester suggests above?

Are they easy to understand quickly?

Activity 7

In the article on Disney World signage, what choices did the designers made when choosing typography (that is, the kind of font used)?

What about for form?

The use of form on the Disney signs is interesting to consider. Two circles, a basic shape, were used to suggest Mickey Mouse's ears. The conventional—and potentially boring—rectangle of some of the signs became much more interesting by the addition of Mickey's hands "reaching" over the top.

A time sequence was also used, almost like an animation. Visitors driving along one of the roads saw, on a series of signs, Mickey emerging from behind the signs, bit by bit, as they got closer.

• Depth

Informational designs usually simplify the illusion of depth. Think of a weather map on the television. All the isobars of pressure have been simplified to swirls across a “flat” area of land and sea. The clouds seem to be white blobs all on one level above the patchy colors below. And you may have seen the maps of underground railway systems, such as those in London or New York, which make the railways look neat, logical, and as if they are all on one level under the city.

But even in road signs—the flattest kind of informational graphic there is—the illusion of depth can be exploited in order to make the signs easier to read. As discussed earlier, this can be done by using colors that seem to come forward, combined with others that recede.

Your work in multimedia will almost certainly deal in three dimensions at some point. Moving through space and around objects is an exciting part of the experience for game players or in animations. But just how do people perceive space? How do you judge when it’s safe to drive across an intersection? How do you work out exactly where the pencil is that you want to pick up off your desk?

In any situation, real or virtual, there are eight different depth cues that work on their own or together to create the feeling of depth and space. The eight factors are: space, size, color, lighting, textural gradients, interposition, time, and perspective.

Here we look at seven of these cues:

Space

Space is the frame in which an image is located. With a natural scene, the space depends on how close you are to the subject. Standing in an open field gives you the feeling of a large amount of space and enhances the feeling of depth. If an object is close to the eyes, depth perception is limited.

Size

Size can help in the illusion of depth perception if the viewer is aware of the object’s actual size. A 747 jet airliner seen from a distance is a small size on the viewer’s retina. If someone has no idea of what the flying object is, she would conclude that it is quite small. But because we are familiar with the actual size of the aircraft, we simply know that it is far away. . . .

Color

. . . an object’s color can communicate depth. Warm-colored objects appear closer than cool-colored objects. High-contrast pictures with great differences between light and dark tones seem closer than objects colored with more neutral tones.

Lighting

Differences in light intensities can communicate depth. . . . [The bright lights on a television newsreader] separate the person from the background. The prevalence of shadows also indicates an object’s volume and gives the viewer another depth cue. . . .

Textural Gradients

The ripple effect seen in a still pond suddenly disturbed by a rock, or ridges from the wind against a sand dune are called textural gradients. The ridges appear closer together as the viewer moves away.

Interposition

Interposition is the placement of one object in front of another to give the illusion of depth. Similar objects positioned side by side without lighting from behind and simple line drawings do not communicate three-dimensional depth. A near object is in the foreground, whereas a far object is in the background. Determining the difference between foreground and background objects is an important depth cue.

Perspective

. . . . When you stand on a railroad track . . . , the steel rails seem to converge into a single . . . vanishing point, in the distance. This trait of parallel lines when seen at a distance is called linear perspective. . . .

In geometrical perspective, the artist shows near figures in the lower portion of the picture, and objects farther away higher in the frame. . . . Children often exhibit this type of perspective in their drawings.

Conceptual perspective . . . relies on a more symbolic definition of depth perception than the other types of perspectives. . . . the most important person in a group picture . . . is larger in size than other, less important people. (19)

• Movement

The eyes detect not only movement, but its speed and direction. Something coming directly at our eyes can make us blink protectively—sometimes even before we realise we’re doing it.

Speed and direction of movement can, like many other aspects of vision, have an effect on our emotions. Movement that is travelling fast towards us makes us anxious as we think about the possible impact or pain it might cause. But an experience which creates a sense that we ourselves are travelling fast—like a simulated racing car or roller coaster—can be exciting.

Erratic movement, or movement that stops and starts, can cause nervousness, because we can’t predict where the object will end up. Or it can be funny, like Charlie Chaplin’s walk or a toy.

Our sensitivity to movement is one of self-preservation: “Recognizing movement is one of the most important traits in the survival of an animal.” (20)

• What does this mean for multimedia design?

In this lesson, we have looked at some of the most fundamental ways that people see. But along with that, we have learned that these basic elements also have emotional or psychological effects. When you are constructing your multimedia designs, you can use these effects. If you want an exciting, dynamic design, you now have an indication of what shapes, colors, and movement to use. If, on the other hand, you want to create something calm or stable, you will avoid the elements that stimulate anxiety or uncertainty, and combine lines, colors, movement and shapes that are soothing.

You also know how to bring things to people’s attention, so that you can guide their eyes to navigation points. And you can make use of the different kinds of vision, the foveal and the peripheral, for different purposes in your work.

It all seems so basic—and it is! But what you have learned can form the building blocks for your future designs.

Activity 8

Look at any multimedia product—choose something you really like.

How does it use:

Color

Form

Depth

And movement?

How are things placed?

How are they lit?

What kinds of typefaces are used?

What effects does this have on you?

Think about how you could use these attributes in various multimedia projects you would like to work on one day.

• Exercise (for discussion Week 3)

This lesson explores how colors, shapes and movement can create different feelings. Look at the three images supplied for this exercise. Look particularly at the colors and shapes, and the way the elements are placed, and relate them to what the lesson says. Which of the images is calm and stable? Which is dynamic and energetic? Which one is likely to provoke anxiety? Write 100 words about what the colors, shapes and placement suggest in these images.

• Summary

1. When you know how people see and process information, you can use that knowledge to make your multimedia product work better, whether you want people to grasp information quickly or to take their time enjoying the experience.
2. People have two basic types of vision, foveal and peripheral, that perform different functions and need different conditions. You can use these to your advantage in your multimedia designs.
3. Color, form, depth and movement are the four basic ways that the brain processes visual messages from the eye.
4. Many responses to visual stimuli are shaped by culture and/or may be subjective and individualistic, including reactions to color, line, shape and perspective.

• Resources

Heller, Steven and Karen Pomeroy, "Disney World Signage," *Design Literacy*, New York: Allworth Press, 1997, pp177-80 [Supplementary reading, begins next page]

Lester, Paul Martin, *Visual Communication: Images with Messages* (2nd ed), Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 2000

Tufte, Edward R., *Visual Explanations: Images and Quantities, Evidence and Narrative*, Cheshire, Connecticut: Graphics Press, 1997

Supplementary reading

Heller, Steven and Karen Pomeroy “Disney World Signage,”
Design Literacy, New York: Allworth Press, 1997, pp177-80

Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida, is not a Mickey Mouse operation. It is as large as San Francisco and as diverse as New York’s five boroughs. By comparison it reduces the original Disneyland in Anaheim, California, founded in 1955, to the status of mere amusement park. Disney World is the escapist capital of the world with attractions like the Magic Kingdom, a fantasy theme park modeled after Disneyland; Walt Disney Village and Pleasure Island, a mammoth resort and shopping mall; Epcot Center, a world’s fair-scaled projection of the future; and UA/MGM Studio, a Hollywood movie set come to life. These realms are separated by large greenbelts and connected by a north-south axial highway and arterial road system, which like any interstate requires precise way-finding management. But precision is only one concern of Michael D. Eisner, Walt Disney Inc.’s chairman and chief executive officer.

Eisner’s widely publicized strategy of growth brought with it a Medicean patronage of art and architecture. His commissions to postmodern architects Michael Graves, Frank Gehry, and Arata Isozaki reflected a commitment to the unique and unusual. Paul Goldberger, architecture critic of the *New York Times*, called Disney Inc. “a corporate patron like no other.” Hence, the commission given to Sussman/Preja and Company—the creators of the carnival-modern graphics of the 1985 Los Angeles Summer Olympics—to design Disney World’s road signs, buses, and gateways underscored Disney’s commitment to distinctive design, down to the smallest detail.

In 1986 Eisner thrust Walt Disney Inc. into a developmental frenzy that included expansion of its film, publishing, and resort operations in the United States and Europe. Unlike most American cities of comparable size, where poor planning has ruined skylines and made ingress and egress confusing at best, Disney believed in coordinated development. A responsibility for the total comfort of visitors, both in the attractions and on the roads, meant that as Disney World grew, a new environment that facilitated mobility and identified Disney World as an integral and accessible entity was needed.

“In the beginning our signage was like everywhere else in the country,” said Eisner about their original “liver-colored” road signs that also serve as the National Park Service standard. But beyond his apparent preference for nonconformity, Eisner admitted, “I drove myself around Disney World but routinely got lost. If I couldn’t find my way who could?” The desire for a contemporary look, plus the development of new hotels and attractions were good enough reasons for Eisner’s decision to change the entire system. But he also offered a more fundamental rationale: “When Walt Disney World was originally built, the Magic Kingdom was up at the extreme north of our property. I’m told that the [development group] felt that if they signed at the beginning of the property, kids would get so excited about going to the Magic Kingdom they’d be frustrated to find a fifteen minute drive ahead of them.” With the new growth it no longer took fifteen minutes to get to a Disney attraction, making a uniform signage system not only more appealing but, in fact, quite necessary.

Based on their success with the graphics program for the 1985 Olympics, Deborah Sussman (b. 1931) and Paul Preja (b. 1930) of Sussman/Preja and Company were invited to propose ideas. When they were awarded the commission, Wing Chao, senior vice president of planning, architecture, and engineering of Disney Development (the division administering to all areas other than the design of the thematic attractions) had one simple request: “I wanted their wildest ideas and craziest notions. They shouldn’t hold anything back.” Sussman was glad to oblige. “We showed them a hundred ideas for the one that got built, but that was part of the fun,” she said.

Understanding how the signs could be more efficiently used was key to an effective design solution. Sussman took charge of the design team, Preja led the analytical phase, Scott Cuyler did much of the initial creative work, Robert Cordell was the in-house project manager for all Disney work, and Debra Valencia worked on the typography during the refinement stage. April Greiman, a frequent collaborator with Sussman/Preja, consulted on various aspects of the signage. The design problem was also opened to other designers in their office.

At the outset the designers needed to be familiar with the rather complex layout of Disney World. “We didn’t know what Epcot was,” admitted Sussman. “Or that the Magic Kingdom was essentially the same as Disneyland. Or what Pleasure Island was and how it related to the Magic Kingdom.” Indeed most outsiders are also unaware that these diverse attractions fall under one umbrella. After their initial research was completed, Sussman issued a

statement that became the blueprint for her vision. In it she said, “there is the world and then there is Disney World,” suggesting the scope and limits of the problem.

The first planning decision was to simplify the signage requirements yet attend to every complex detail. “We decided to establish a series of discrete districts, similar to boroughs,” Sussman said about the initial stage, “Which affected how many of the previous signs we could effectively eliminate. Instead of having to erect a separate sign for every component of Disney World, we could group them into discrete categories that were headed by these districts. That, of course, affected things like size, typography, and nomenclature. Before this, every sign began with ‘Walt Disney World,’ followed by the name of the attraction and other pertinent information. It was like reading a long menu—by the time you get to the end you forget what the other entrées were. Similarly, by the time you’ve finished reading the road sign [if you can read it at all] what you probably remember is the heading. That indicates a tremendous amount of redundancy.”

The new plan reduced the number of messages under the district name, which was then eliminated on the signs nearer to the attraction. A hierarchy of signs was established and designed accordingly; it included large highway signs, secondary message markers (like what frequency to turn the car radio to for Disney World’s exclusive channel), off-highway directionals, and so on. The next step involved the three basic aesthetic components: color, typography, and form. “We agreed with the Disney people who felt that they had enough images in Disney World already,” Sussman continued. “But we did, however, want to evoke the spirit of Disney. Our challenge was how to do it without imitating or, as Frank Gehry said ‘co-opting, or being co-opted by’ these famous Disney icons. Our answer was to look at the simplest vocabulary possible.”

Sussman selected Univers type because of its numerous size and weight variations. As for color, “Mickey is black and white, plus red and yellow. Yet from these colors you can’t make a whole signing system—at least we didn’t think that we could,” she said. Ultimately green was introduced, as well as purple for its playful spirit. As for form, Sussman played around with various cut-paper configurations, and Scott Cuyler devised the angular post used for some of the highway signs, which took on a kind of postmodern, or Disney Deco, flavor. But in the end it was Mickey’s profound influence that made the difference. Without literally looking like Mickey Mouse, the addition of a black circle (in which directionals were placed) onto the otherwise rectangular signboards became an indispensable graphic signature. “It worked immediately,” Sussman said about the simple yet brilliant composition. “And when we made the signs that had two circles, it was unmistakably Mickey.”

The concept went to Eisner for final consideration, who, according to Sussman, said upon first glance “‘If I had to make a decision today, I’d say yes.’ But since this was a major commitment, he wanted to test it out while looking at other ideas.” Eisner loved the colors, and even suggested they be copyrighted so that no one else could use them. But he also wanted to know what else could make the signs “more Disney.” An obvious suggestion was to put Mickey’s hand in the black circle in place of the arrow. “We tried it out as a full scale, on-site sign,” Sussman explained, “but we felt strongly that it didn’t work. The hand just does not want to become an arrow.” Since Eisner liked the idea, Sussman was a little worried that he would insist on going with it. “But,” she said, “when we showed it to him he admitted that we were right.” Another option was to use a silhouette of a Disney character or part of one sticking out of a diagonal sign for off-highway use. However, the feeling at Disney was that visitors would either steal them or stop to have their pictures taken next to them, which would ultimately impede the flow of traffic. In the end they decided on one special series of highway messages featuring Mickey on three sequential overhead signs spread over a few miles. The first showed two yellow gloved hands reaching over the sign, Kilroy style; in the second, two round black ears peeked up; and finally, in the third, Mickey’s smiling face peered over.

Like an old Burma Shave sign, these teasers span Disney World’s main highway. Elsewhere 775 other signs of all descriptions, even the commonplace markers indicating stop, yield, and speed are set atop colorful stanchions and pylons that are not only efficient, but playfully decorative. How have the signs fared with the public? “They have gotten good response,” Eisner said proudly. “I don’t know whether it’s because people now know where they’re going or that they really like the look.” In creating an environment that reflects its time, communicates a purpose, and defines a corporation that since its inception has devoted itself to celebrating the imagination, Sussman/Preja joined other architects and designers who transformed Disney World into a festival of late twentieth-century design.