

Wayfinding

The AGO: The Canadian Museum Reborn

By Keith Francis

The newest architectural statements to land on our urban shores – the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) extension and the recently revamped Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), both in Toronto, are true signs of progress.

It's no coincidence that both of these remarkable buildings are museums; indeed, in our times museums have become structures synonymous with cultural and architectural significance.

More than a façade, architecture perceptually defines the economic, social and cultural health of modern cities. Beyond its aesthetic properties, it has the ability to stimulate urban infrastructure, commercial investment and enterprise, artistic and cultural renaissance, workforce and residential renewal, and more importantly pride of place. Toronto, and Canada as a whole, should be proud to house not one but two groundbreaking statements of architecture.

Daniel Libeskind's ROM addition is an arresting, obtuse post-modern expression of angularity, in remarkable contrast with Frank Gehry's AGO blend of organic simplicity and earthbound aesthetic uniformity – a "restrained masterpiece," as *The Globe and Mail* put it. With diametrically opposite physical vernaculars, both expressions boldly provoke the sometimes staid cultural conservatism apparent in Canadian architecture, and provide a welcome juxtaposition with Toronto's condominium-laden skyline. Where the AGO is concerned, revolutionary design aside, its transformation entailed a massive eight year architectural, engineering and consulting undertaking, not the least of which capitalized on signage and wayfinding to shape the visitor experience.

Transformation AGO: Incorporating Signage and Wayfinding

For projects of this scope, signage and wayfinding are so intertwined that signage cannot be discussed alone. Without the behavioural science of navigation known as wayfinding, signage is reduced to a random placement of physical objects, or worse, a series of visual pollutants lacking consideration for the dynamics of environmental aesthetics.

This is an all-too-common outcome if wayfinding, or the process of signage implementation, is an afterthought to the architectural project. Wayfinding can actually assist architects in shaping the language of the building's architecture: rather than





adapting a signage and wayfinding system to work with an environment, the environment itself should be made to interface holistically with all communication elements.

Used properly wayfinding uses logic and restraint in signage placement and application, its methodology enabling clear information identification. In an effective wayfinding system, intuitive navigation through the structure is supported by text, graphics, pictograms, colours and shapes.

Fortunately, the specialized Transformation AGO team of architects, designers, manufacturers and signage and wayfinding professionals understood the perils of treating signage and wayfinding as an add-on to the process of architectural design. Instead, they embraced the idea of signage as a strategic exercise integral to conceptualizing the overall visitor experience.

Defining the Visitor Experience

When identifying the success factors of implementing a signage and wayfinding program, the team recognized the critical role played by the logical imperatives of signage and wayfinding: direction, numbers, arrows, graphics. Even more importantly, they highlighted signage and wayfindings ability to improve the

visitor experience by providing clarity, tone, reassurance, comfort, security and a sense of place – an idea welcomed by Linda Milrod, senior project manager and installation director for Transformation AGO.

“Our design mantra was “the visitor experience is paramount;” everyone embraced this philosophy. Our aim was to create an inclusive, participatory forum with equal emphasis and attention to all disciplines: design, signage, wayfinding and architecture,” says Milrod.

As the AGO structure has undergone six previous expansions since the 1920s, Milrod understood the criticality of a well-integrated wayfinding program in connecting the AGO buildings into a unified edifice as far as visitor experience goes, and in avoiding confusion when navigating their different paths.

As a project, Gehrys transformation affected every part of the structure; it was thus paramount to define its mission from the outset. This enabled the team to understand the context and characteristics of the building that could aid the implementation of a functional, intuitive wayfinding system, producing a more transparent and navigable museum. The system should link the



different building types involved to provide much-needed symmetry and simplify the material palette, making for a warm and comforting environment.

Of equal importance was the need for the team to recognize that signage should not interfere with the experience, and should only be placed where key decisions will be made. As Milrod explains, "every building has a physical vernacular that needs to conform to the visitor experience. The frenetic pace of an airport requires an in-your-face and visually apparent signage system; conversely museums retain a subtle, subdued and restrained sensibility, where the building slowly unveils its content, with signage playing a supporting role to address the visitors' navigational needs." Milrod was right to point out that the AGO was fortunate to be working with an architect that supports this philosophy by virtue of his sensitivity to the significance of content.

Implementing Signage

The AGO hired Bruce Mau Design (BMD) to implement architectural, wayfinding and donor recognition signage. BMD brought extensive wayfinding experience to the project, having completed work for landmarks such as New York City's Museum of Modern Art, whose minimalist design and spirit are in line with Gehry's vision for the AGO.

According to Dave Wilkinson, senior designer for BMD, "Our job was to design a wayfinding system that would not interfere with the clean lines of the AGO's current architecture."

Recognizing that wayfinding signage is an aspect of the larger composition of its environment, BMD studied the AGO's architectural properties at length to ensure signs don't seem an afterthought. In designing the wayfinding system, Wilkinson took visual cues directly from the existing structure. Elements such as Douglas fir accents and anodized, hand-brushed aluminum for donor and elevator signs ensure a seamless integration of objects with environment. BMD ensured signage plays a supporting role to the main attraction, the art.

Working with key stakeholders, independent consultant Mike Melnyk took BMD's plans from concept through to construction. As in previous collaborations with BMD on wayfinding projects for the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, The Avenues in Kuwait, and Cairo's Grand Egyptian Museum, Melnyk used signage placement principles and a keen eye for detail to transform drawings into three dimensional fabricated signs.

Although it constructed more than 10,000 individual letters for signage, principal manufacturer Acumen Visual Group saw the project scope as a matter of quality rather than scale: each and every letter was treated as a piece of art. Provided by King Architectural Products, main entrance and lobby signage was carefully inspected by Melnyk to ensure it reflects the AGO's and Gehry's design principles. In the signage manufacturing stage, no compromise was too small or too great when it came to selecting the right balance of materials and using appropriate finishes and elevations to enhance optimal placement for viewing.



Measuring Wayfinding Success

Since the AGO's reopening in November 2008, visitor feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, and although there are few complaints focused on the wayfinding system, the museum continues to perfect it. During behavioural observation sessions, it identified the need to revise visitor maps to aid navigation. As Milrod explains, "we redid the map and wayfinding language so that they coincide and work seamlessly together."

The Transformation AGO project's success is reflected in Frank Gehry's own reaction to the finished product during an unannounced visit shortly after the museum's reopening. Having found it difficult to appreciate the work as a whole during construction, Gehry intended to experience the AGO as a casual visitor rather than the architect responsible for its metamorphosis. A smiling Gehry emerged from the building satisfied with its ability to support its content and provide a positive visitor experience, Milrod proudly recounts.

Scholars have long maintained that architecture and the elements supporting it, such as signage and wayfinding, have a profound effect on the human condition. If so, the AGO transformation's impact on its own creator is proof positive that the project is an accomplishment for Toronto, and a point of pride for Canada.

With files from Acumen Visual Group, Bruce Mau Design and the Art Gallery of Ontario. For more information, visit www.ideasbuilt.ca, www.brucemaudesign.com and www.ago.net.

