



# Wayfinding Planning and Design with Communities

Jayoung Koo, Department of Landscape Architecture

Wayfinding is an ability to orient oneself based on repeated cues from the physical environment. Travel experiences for both residents and visitors can be strengthened through efficiently laid out information in our physical environments. Features that stand out in the environment can remind people of a particular meaning through experience and recognition.

A five step process can benefit communities as they plan and strategize efforts to develop an effective wayfinding project.

**Step 1 Inventory:** Identify and analyze existing wayfinding features and the pedestrian environment

**Step 2 Analysis:** Identify specific locations for wayfinding features and strategies that could work with your community

**Step 3 Learn from Others:** Research and learn from successful wayfinding projects

**Step 4 Plan and Design:** Plan for and propose positive experiences with intentionally strategic locations and routes

**Step 5 Plan for Funding:** Prioritize actionable items but also plan for unexpected opportunities

Steps 1,2, and 4 are highlighted in this document. Examples of the remaining two steps, 3 and 5, are discussed in the corresponding series document *Wayfinding Planning and Design at Work*.

## INVENTORY

- What signage features/tools currently exist to inform and direct people around town?
- What are some of the recognizable attributes in the community?
- Where are features located within or beyond close proximity to the community?

- What interesting businesses and/or features exist within the town that residents and visitors associate with or visit?

The wayfinding experience becomes more memorable and appealing to those experiencing the environment when a specific feature is associated with the location. These resources can be mapped by taking a visual walking tour of the community. Volunteers can identify locations, conditions, contents, features and design styles on a map, and add notes and photographs to the map (Table 1, Figure 1).

Communities should also recognize the wider context of the built environment such as local

**Table 1. Wayfinding Project Inventory**

Biological/Physical
-Land use plans
-Zoning ordinances
-Infrastructure maps
-Maps, lists of wildlife and plant species
-Landmark species
-Significant/flagship species
-Climate, temperature information for weather prediction
-Physical condition of spaces and places
Social/Economic
-Local and regional demographics such as age, gender, ethnicity, etc.
-Economic indicators
-Locations of businesses
-Development regulations
-Downtown business district plans, etc.
-Planning documents and regulations
-Design standards/codes
-Codes and standards for districts
-Gathering locations
Historical/Cultural
-Historical maps, photos, documentation, etc.
-Historic district designations, including buildings, plaques, etc.
-Community programs and events
-Gathering places
-Cultural landmarks
-Valued/sacred spaces, places, locations
-Sense of place indicators

**CEDIK**  
Community & Economic  
Development Initiative of Kentucky  
[cedik.ca.uky.edu](http://cedik.ca.uky.edu)

topography, building types, historical sites, significance of preservation areas, future areas of development, and traffic flow patterns.

**A) Biological/Physical Information**

Biological/physical information is mostly related to physical features which may include points of interest, destinations, existing trails or pathways, historical buildings, existing signage, and landmarks such as an old growth tree or the edge of a forest. Such features are important existing navigation tools because they allow a community to better understand what visually significant cues already exist. These resources can be mapped by taking a visual walking tour of the community. Volunteers can identify locations, conditions, contents, features and design styles on a map, and add notes and photographs as well.

**B) Social/Economic Information**

Social/economic information supports decisions to predict the types of wayfinding tools and methods that are appropriate for a particular community. A variety of tools may facilitate an individual’s travel through both familiar and unfamiliar settings. Local comprehensive plans, land use plans and zoning or signage ordinances address and provide guidelines

for features such as locations, restrictions and limitations for uses and designs. These documents can be accessed through city or county planning and zoning departments or economic development authorities.

**C) Historical/Cultural Information**

The history and culture of a community ultimately supports the foundation of a local wayfinding system design that facilitates user navigation and creates a strong sense of place. Each community should build upon its unique identity to creatively reflect and represent their history and culture for planning and design. Soliciting the events and experiences that a community takes pride in and refers back to as “those good old days” is important to consider for reflection. The community, as well as visitors, are more likely to accept and engage the cultural attributes when they are incorporated into the navigation experience and the regional context. Transferring ideas and information from these positive experiences can also bring the community together by paying tribute to the history of a place while also projecting an enhanced future. Information may include historical maps, photos, illustrations, journals, diaries, newspaper articles, historical documentation, and past and present



**Figure 1. Inventory of existing public spaces, streetscape elements, and significant features reflecting Hindman’s historical/cultural character.**

cultural events. Such locations have meaning and value and already are part of the wayfinding system in the community.

More information gathered during the inventory phase will lead to better informed planning and design of the wayfinding project. Also, keep in mind that all information is useful and most effective when mapped (Figure 1). In this way, one is able to later analyze and establish vehicular and pedestrian pathways within a community or identify paths or routes that are not used widely by residents and/or visitors.

## ANALYSIS

A variety of data collected from the inventory step supports the analysis step. During the analysis phase of a wayfinding project, community groups need to understand what existing features, tools, or methods work well in the community. This step provides community groups with opportunities to strategize where, what and how to situate navigation support tools most efficiently and effectively to better guide a fulfilling experience for residents and visitors.

During the analysis, communities should:

- Examine the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and limitations of wayfinding features in the landscape.
- Identify potential informative features in the existing environment that may be underutilized.
- Determine which frequently used paths or destinations can further benefit from

wayfinding features within the community.

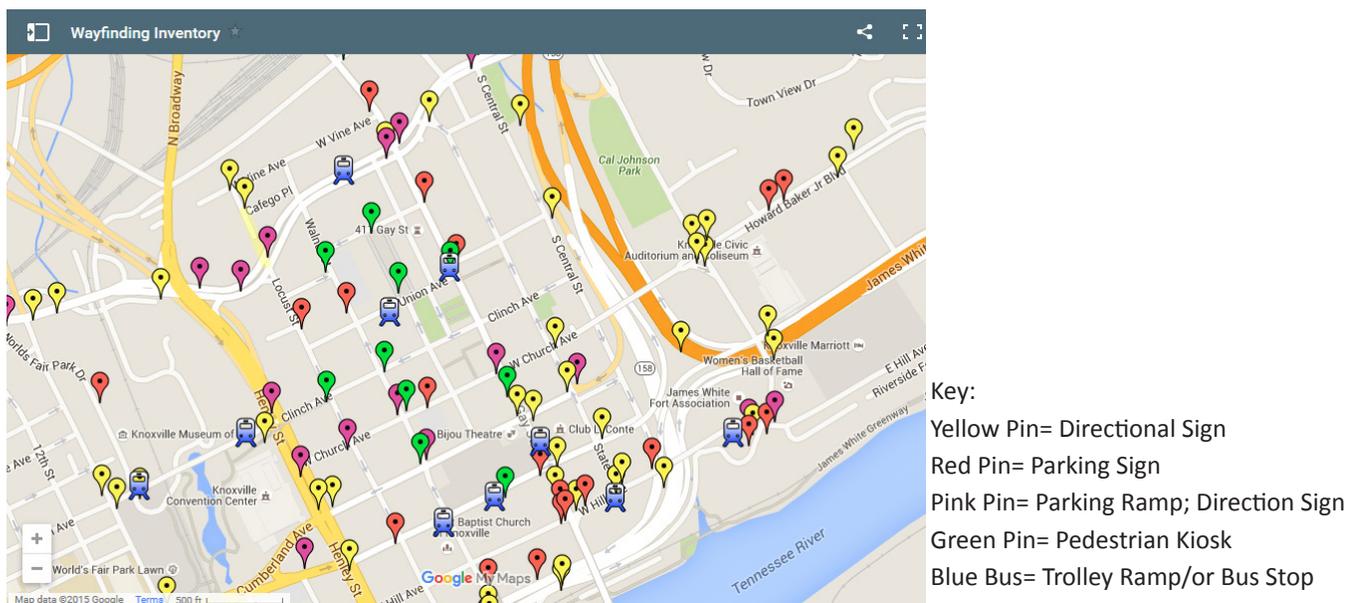
- Identify other routes that could benefit from increased foot traffic.

The mapped information should help identify assets and/or gaps in the current wayfinding system. The analysis should combine the existing information about the site with potential features needed for assisting navigation in areas where foot traffic is concentrated. Communities should determine the most appropriate navigation tools for their users. Additionally, locations for the complementing information should be agreed upon so that users can easily and clearly benefit from the assisted travel. Specific contents, styles and locations of navigation assistance features may also be conceptualized through this brainstorming and decision-making process. The ultimate goals for effective wayfinding projects should be to increase visibility and cognition of routes for the users.

## LEARN FROM OTHERS

There are a number of ways in which wayfinding information may be collected, compiled, saved, and shared either traditionally in hard copy, electronically in digitized format, or through interactive tools. For example, the City of Knoxville, TN, used Google as a tool to create and share a signage inventory map (Figure 2).

Mobile apps and social media can also attract and increase interest in community collaboration where they can share or highlight features such as landmarks and destinations. Such information



**Figure 2. City of Knoxville, Tennessee, Wayfinding Inventory Map identifying 111 sign types (powered by Google).**

Source: City of Knoxville, Tennessee, 2015

**Table 2. Example of wayfinding signage types, locations and functions**

Type	Location	Function
Gateway or entry sign	-Single spot or at all entry points to the district, area or city	-Welcome visitors -Inform them about the town and its historical and cultural significance
Informational kiosks	-Focal points such as the entrance or center of the district -Areas where there is increased foot traffic	-Provide information to people near the intersections of main streets
Pole banners	-Along the street utilizing existing poles	-Present the identity of the area
Placards	-Contributing buildings in historic districts	-Uniform placards for identity coherence

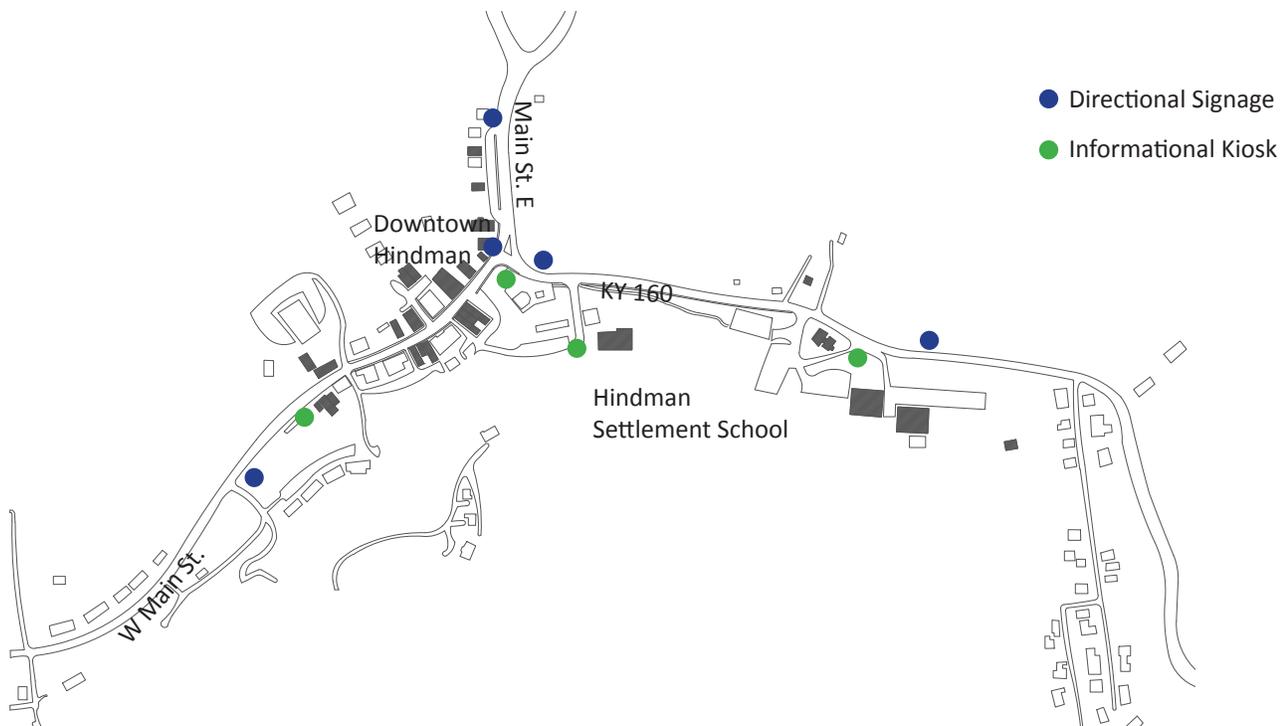
enables working groups to prioritize the important features and aspects within the community that they plan to highlight. Working groups can reach out to potential visitors and other non-community members to survey their interests to visit and ideas regarding the navigation experience. They can also ask visitors to assess the wayfinding system’s effectiveness. The working group can use this additional feedback to understand and predict future target audiences. Such information and visualized data will directly inform working groups about the type of wayfinding tools that could be utilized and appropriate locations for the tools.

**PLAN AND DESIGN**

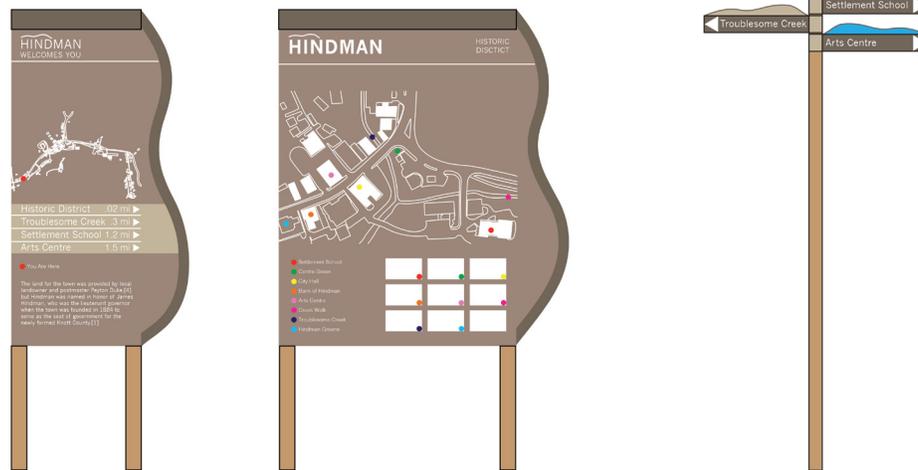
Wayfinding visioning sessions may address the challenges and opportunities of their system and determine a systematic strategy for locating or

re-locating appropriate signage or navigation tools to fulfill their goals (Table 2). For example, groups could brainstorm ideas about which tools can better support people to move around town and have a positive experience. They can also test and determine the range of wayfinding tools appropriate for the community’s goals.

Depending on the scale of the project, opportunities may exist to expand the scope of the project to include the entire town and even entrance points to the town from major routes such as highways. In some Kentucky towns, communities hope to attract visitors from beyond their immediate boundaries as a means to strengthen economic development. Beyond the city boundary, identification sign(s) should be located at major entrances to the town in order to attract traffic. Once directed into town, communities need to make features evident and



**Figure 3. Potential wayfinding signage locations in Historic Downtown Hindman, KY**



**Figure 4. Example of informational kiosks and complementary styles and forms for directional signage with dulcimer theme and cultural materials in Hindman, KY.**

Source: Achan Sookying

visible through reader friendly signage systems which direct visitors to attractions and amenities such as a historic district, downtown area, historic sites, etc. Different types of signs may be installed but the style and forms should complement each other and have consistent styles so that a traveler can clearly recognize their whereabouts while in certain areas of the community (Figure 3, Figure 4).

## CONCLUSION

Effective wayfinding systems will benefit communities by portraying their community's historical and future significance. The right combination of wayfinding features will make travel easier and interesting while supporting a pleasant navigation experience for both residents and visitors which can influence potential economic activities through increased visitation.

If you think your community is interested in planning or designing a wayfinding system, please contact the author with inquiries.

Further Reading in the Wayfinding Series:

*Effective Navigation through Your Community:  
Wayfinding and Signage Systems for Communities  
Wayfinding Planning and Design at Work*

## REFERENCES

Arthur, P. & Passini, R. (2002). *Wayfinding: people, signs, and architecture (Limited Commemorative Edition)*. Ontario, Canada: Focus Strategic Communications.

City of Knoxville, Tennessee. (2015). *Wayfinding Inventory*. Retrieved from <http://www.cityofknoxville.org/wayfinding/map.html>

Gibson, D. (2009). *The Wayfinding Handbook: Information Design for Public Places*. New York, NY: Princeton Architectural Press.

Raubal, Martin. (2002). "Enriching Wayfinding Instructions with Local Landmarks." *Institute for Geoinformation*, 243-259.