



Creative Insight

WHY SIGNAGE NEEDS TO ADAPT TO A GENDER-INCLUSIVE WORLD

CR speaks to a handful of designers and creatives to understand why the right signage and wayfinding in cultural institutions and spaces can be a significant step towards creating an inclusive environment

By Rebecca Fulleylove 27/09/2021



How an institution – whether it’s a museum, gallery or public space – communicates with visitors is integral to a their experience. So being inclusive, in all its different forms, seems like a no-brainer. But even so, many of these spaces, especially those with a national or global reach, have been slow to adapt to changing cultural mores.

“There is a difference between passive and active welcoming. Simply not turning people away is not inclusion. In order to genuinely include all would-be visitors, they need to be actively welcomed,” explains Margaret Middleton, a designer and consultant who advocates for inclusive museum practices in their work.





Top and above: The Photographers' Gallery Signage by Soofiya

“Historically, western museums have been places for the white and wealthy elite. As museum practice has become more education-based and visitor-focused, there has been a shift in values around being accessible, inclusive, and welcoming. Traditional museums for adults trail behind the children’s museum field in this regard because children’s museums have always put the visitor first – the visitor is right there in the name of the museum.”

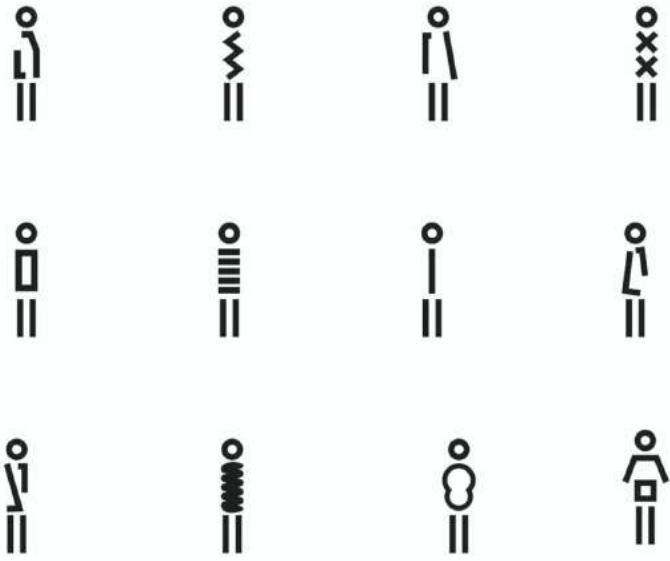
One area in which Middleton feels this is particularly lacking is in the signage and icons used in cultural institutions, and it’s one that could be easy to resolve. “Signage is an important part of a museum visit for many reasons. Iconography can transcend language barriers and well-designed wayfinding can ease frustration and make a museum visit much smoother,” they explain.

“Gender neutral toilets are a really good example of how we can do something very small that has a big impact”

“Museum architecture can be confusing and museum fatigue is real. Museums also have a reputation for being rules-y and many visitors already feel anxious coming through the door, let alone wandering around concerned they might get yelled at by a guard. Signage can help museum-goers understand what to expect.”

Designer and illustrator Soofiya agrees and thinks inclusive signage is about creating a culture of care. “It’s something I feel as a society that we should, can and are, at times, moving towards. This culture of care means having places that are accessible, whether that’s for wheelchair users, neuro diverse people, everyone,” they note. “And I think gender neutral toilets are a really good example of how we can do something very small that has a big impact.”





The Photographers' Gallery Signage by Soofiya

Soofiya regularly works on projects around inclusivity and diversity, and the positive changes good design can have. In 2018, they were tasked with creating gender inclusive toilet signage for the Photographer’s Gallery to align with its existing identity and ethos.

“I was looking at the two original [toilet] icons, and thought if I were to make them, what icon would I be? If my mum was an icon, what would she be? Or if my friends were icons? And then I realised there isn’t just one icon, I think I was trying to solve it with one solution versus many,” Soofiya says of the project. The end result was a series of diverse and fun icons that could represent whoever may come to visit the gallery.

“I think that’s what a playful response is, it just builds into the imagination and what the world can be,” says the creative. “Yes, let’s make all the toilets inclusive, but it doesn’t have to be strict or serious, it can be about play and I think that’s what this project really kind of hits on.”



The Photographers' Gallery Signage by Soofiya

Another way of approaching more inclusive signage is by using icons that avoid identifying the user and instead the facility. “For example, in all-gender toilet facilities the signage frequently includes an icon of a man and a woman, reinforcing a binary,” says Middleton.

“We can avoid this by using signage that focuses on what’s behind the door – in this case, a toilet. In the case of baby change or baby feeding rooms, typical signage uses an icon of a woman changing a baby’s diaper, reinforcing stereotypical gender roles and alienating men and gender nonconforming people who care for infants. We can avoid this by using icons that focus on the baby, the common denominator in all baby changing and feeding scenarios.”

This is the approach that Canadian architecture and design firm hcma took when creating the identity for Clayton Community Centre in British Columbia. The goal was to design a building (along with signage and wayfinding) that removed as many barriers as possible to use. The toilets and changing rooms for instance are universal with the signage including icons of the facilities available, plus a gender-neutral figure if the facility needs more explanation.



Clayton Community Centre inclusive toilets by hcma

“There is no such thing as an ‘average user’. Public spaces – cultural institutions included – have an ethical and financial responsibility to serve the full breadth of their local communities, not just a select cross-section of the public,” says Melissa Higgs, principal at hcma. “Yet these spaces often exclude whole groups of users – sometimes without realising it, or worse, intentionally when they prioritise so-called average users over those with unique needs.”

Traditionally, Higgs believes signage is the piece of the design puzzle left until last, or used to “fix fundamental design flaws” that emerge after a building opens, or in an older space that needs retrofitting.

Considering signage early on is key and while that might seem simple on paper, Higgs is aware that there are always challenges when it comes to projects like this. Often it’s around budget, but also it’s about ensuring the solutions they find are flexible and future-proofed. “Many of the public spaces we design are built to be around for the next 25, 50 or 100 years. So how do we integrate effective and durable signage and wayfinding, knowing future generations will likely use the spaces in dramatically different ways?” Higgs says.



Clayton Community Centre inclusive toilets by hcma

“At Clayton, we tackled this issue with tactile room signage (including raised letters and braille),” she continues. “It’s been designed modularly, with a frame for changeable content or a digital tablet. We also created magnetic signage for the metal reception desks, so staff are able to self-organise as their daily needs change.”

“When you think about really good examples of change, it’s often from the smaller spaces and organisations as they can turn things around lot more quickly”

We often look to cultural institutions as progressive, or at least willing to present art and ideas that challenge the status quo and move the conversation along. Yet despite the odd initiative here and there, institutions have been relatively slow at becoming more inclusive. “‘Institution’ is the key word here. Institutions are big, and there are a lot of roots, stakeholders and bureaucracy that comes with that. So that inherently will slow down the process of any change,” explains Soofiya. “When you think about really good

examples of change, it's often from the smaller spaces and organisations as they can turn things around a lot more quickly, and get them delivered."

Soofiya compares the Photographer's Gallery to one of the many counterparts of Tate – in terms of structure they're worlds apart, and being smaller can sometimes offer more power in being able to enact change and move towards inclusive cultures. "It is improving though because the conversations that we're having as a society, the dialogue and the discourse, it's far more prevalent than it was ten years ago," they reflect. "We're all a bit more aware and understanding, and that's developing a more common language in some sense. But there's still a long, long way to go. I don't think it begins and ends with us sticking gender neutral toilet signs everywhere. I think that's a tiny, tiny part of the so-called picture that we need to move towards."



Clayton Community Centre inclusive toilets by hcma

Middleton agrees and goes a step further by saying we need to move beyond just gender neutrality and be completely gender inclusive, "because gender is such an important part of people's identities". By being gender inclusive, and creating spaces that embrace gender and its many forms, it's a step towards tackling the real issues which Middleton sees as misogyny, transphobia and homophobia. Like Soofiya, they see signage as one part of a larger set of updates that are needed in museums and galleries, but it's a simple entry point. "Gender equity in museums means hiring women and gender minorities into leadership roles and compensating them fairly, acquiring the work and telling the stories of people of all genders in exhibits and programmes, and offering facilities where the needs of people of all genders are met," they explain.

"It is critical for both public institutions and businesses to understand that diversity is something to strive for, but alone, it isn't enough"

Soofiya sees a fully gender inclusive practice as an ever-evolving process, rather than an end goal. "You can never say you're fully gender inclusive, because there will always be people that aren't in the space. So it's a constant questioning of who's not at the table, and how can we bring them here," they say.

Higgs agrees and believes that while it's important to be sure the right people are making the decisions, it's also about action. "I think it is critical for both public institutions and businesses to understand that diversity is something to strive for, but alone, it isn't

enough. At hcma, we often say, 'diversity is what you have, but inclusion is what you do with it,' she says. "Inclusion is the actions and steps we integrate into our processes and our work; the efforts we make to include diverse voices and experiences in a meaningful way."

margaretmiddleton.com; soofiya.com; hcma.ca

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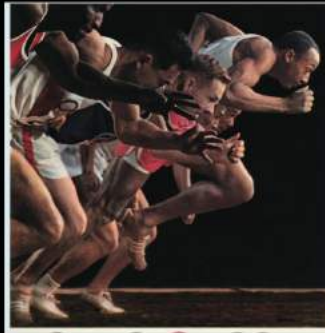
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