

Helping Children Find Their Way

By REBECCA CLAY

Almost 25 years after graduating from my gigantic high school, I still have nightmares about wandering lost amid endless hallways of identical gray lockers. According to Janet R. Carpman, Ph.D., a partner at Carpman Grant Associates Wayfinding Consultants in Ann Arbor, Mich., I'm not the only one. "You're not alone in being traumatized," says Carpman, who traces her interest in wayfinding back to her own experience of getting lost at age three. Problems with wayfinding—which she defines as "the ability to get from here to there and back again"—are a significant source of stress. And children are especially vulnerable.

"While children usually aren't alone when they're trying to find their way around the largest, most confusing environments, such as hospitals, they do have to find their way alone through large spaces like schools," says Carpman. "Time may be limited and the consequences of being late may be severe." Potential consequences include feeling ashamed, being embarrassed or missing things altogether. There may even be safety concerns, adds Carpman.

Even as wayfinding solutions help all ages, designers face special considerations when designing for children. Signs and maps may be above their level, both physically and cognitively. Children may simply be too short to see such aids. They may not even be able to read.

Carpman offers the following tips for helping children—or adults—find their way:

- **Signs and maps.** Signs and maps at the appropriate height and of the appropriate complexity can help children—especially teenagers—find their way around. But these are not enough. "When designers think of the problem of disorientation, their solution is usually signs," Carpman explains. "But wayfinding is not signs, it's behavior."
- **Uniqueness.** Making different areas look different is key. "Institutions typically want things to look uniform," says Carpman. "But one of the ways people use to find their way around is being able to see that one place differs from another." Designers should use color, wall and floor materials, lighting, artwork, plants or anything else they can think of to define unique spaces.
- **Landmarks.** Notable features can also help people recognize where they are and mark a trail to get back again. A memorable sculpture on the way to the library, for instance, can help tired students remember where they are when they emerge disoriented. Says Carpman, seeing that sculpture tells you you're on the right track.
- **Outside views.** Being able to see outside can help people keep track of where they are. "When you're in a maze or an endless loop, it's helpful to be able to look outside and get a point of reference," says Carpman.
- **Linear circulation.** Of course, designers should try to avoid creating endless loops in the first place. Circular pathways aren't the only architectural no-no. Odd angles also confuse.
- **Consultation.** Designers should learn more about wayfinding, urges Carpman, author with her partner, Myron Grant, of *Design That Cares: Planning Health Facilities for Patients and Visitors* (Jossy-Bass, 2001) and the forthcoming *Directional Sense: Everything You Need to Know to Find Your Way with Ease* (M. Evans & Co.). Reviewing the wayfinding literature, going to conferences and teaming up with wayfinding experts can all help, she says.