

# Wayfinding is caring

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## Abstract

Wayfinding systems are those systems of signs, physical and digital, designed to help people in the process of orientation toward their destination in a predefined environment. They can also serve as informative systems about the place and as a way to enhance the sense of belonging of the user towards that place. According to the literature review, *wayfinding* can mainly be related to the concept of *care* when dealing with the medical sector, both for the environment in which is located (e.g. hospital, healthcare center) or for the kind of user it is designed for (e.g. elderly people or children, people with physical or mental disabilities). The concept of care could also be considered from a broader perspective, far from the medical one, not only towards the people but also towards the inanimate environment, as a way to preserve and fix it. Assuming this perspective, it is possible to see how the three main functions of a wayfinding system, orienting, informing and creating a sense of belonging for the user to the place, can be an act of care towards both the people and their surrounding place. In order for wayfinding to be an act of care, wayfinding designers have to dive into the place, to understand the needs of the users, the stratification of meanings of each place and the various relations occurring among the different entities that populate that space. In particular, two methodologies are useful for wayfinding designers to go in this direction: co-design and ethnosemiotics. The first has already been used in wayfinding-related projects and has proven useful to succeed in designing efficient wayfinding systems. But the ethnosemiotics ability to observe and enhance the correlation and reciprocity occurring among the different actors could be a way for wayfinding designers to better express throughout a wayfinding system a sense of care not only towards the people but also toward the built environment.

## Author keywords

Wayfinding; care; communication design; public space.

## Introduction

The terms *wayfinding* and *care* are usually related to each other, in scientific writing, mainly when dealing with the medical sector, as will be highlighted through a literature review process. But the term care can have a broader meaning to which the design of wayfinding systems in urban environments could also be linked. If we consider wayfinding, applied to urban public spaces, not only as a manner to help people find their destination in an environment but also as a way to communicate that environment, in all its complexity, not only

architectural but also cultural and historical, we will see how wayfinding systems can be seen as an inclusive act of care, for their aim to preserve and communicate both the tangible and the intangible heritage of the place, and, at the same time, to be an expression of all the plural and diverse community living within it.

## An overview of the literature

To start dealing with this issue and better framing the state of the art, the first thing that I have done, was a review of the publications linked to the terms *wayfinding* and *care*. I started looking for wayfinding, in general, to then go deeper into its application in urban public spaces, the context of interest for this research.

## The research: strategy and first understandings

I started the literature review by limiting the research to three of the most used and updated web repositories, Scopus, Web of Science and Jstor, searching for the terms *wayfinding* and *care* with no specific timeframe. Within the obtained results I went through a review of the titles, the abstracts and, when needed, the entire text to see how most of them were related to the medical concept of care. Going deeper into this analysis, I was able to see how the publications related to these two terms were mostly linked to the medical area, both for the place where the wayfinding system is located or for the user it is designed for. To check the state of the art regarding the possible connection between the term wayfinding and a broader sense of care, I started excluding those articles that explicitly refer to healthcare, for example referring to users with certain kinds of physical or mental disabilities or grouped by their physical features or that make reference to environments related to the healthcare system. Through the exclusion system mentioned, I was able to identify just a few numbers of publications that were not related to the medical concept of care.

## Results and findings

This first overview of the state of the art highlights a gap in the literature about the possible relation between *wayfinding* and a concept of *care* that is not related to the medical field. According to the literature, wayfinding is mainly related to the concept of care when it deals with the medical field, both for the environment in which is located (hospital, healthcare center) or for the kind of user it is designed for (elderly people, people with physical or mental disabilities...). Just a few papers have been found that are not related at all to the medical concept of care. We will go through two of them that are of



particular interest for the purpose of this research because they take into consideration care with the same perspective as I do even if with different approaches. The first one, *Material Ordering and the Care of Things* by Denis and Pontille (2015), introduces the concept of care of Puig de la Bellacasa (2017). In particular, they consider the activity of maintenance related to it, applying it to the materials and signs of which a wayfinding system is made of. In this sense, the concept of care is directly applied to a wayfinding system, a perspective that they started to explore in a previous paper specifically concerning the Paris metro wayfinding system (Denis & Pontille, 2014). The second publication related to this topic that I took into consideration is *Ethical Wayfinding* by Linda Knight (2021), a chapter in a book dedicated to the concept of *Inefficient Mapping*, the title of the book itself. In this text Knight cites the same concept of care of Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) referring specifically to the ethics of care for the place, its histories and politics (Knights, 2021). Doing so, situates wayfinding within the ethics of care, putting in relation the wayfinding practice with the act of giving value to the surrounding environment, by the wayfinders themselves. In addition to these two publications, there is one last interesting reference to the concept of care which is the one expressed by Arthur and Passini in their masterpiece *Wayfinding. People, signs and architecture* (Arthur & Passini, 1992), about the importance for us, as designers, to care more about wayfinding. So, all these publications refer to *care* differently: the first one addresses the issue of care towards wayfinding systems; the second lets us see how the wayfinding process of each person can be a manner to add value to the surrounding environment assuming an ethic of care; the third put the designers in the position of caring about the wayfinding process to improve the quality of wayfinding systems. Instead, through this research I will try to explore another connection between these two terms, pointing out how wayfinding systems could be an expression of care themselves towards people and the environment they live in, starting with defining the concept of care and the possible relation to wayfinding in urban public space.

### The relation between care and wayfinding in public space

If we consider care not only from a perspective related to the medical field, where this concept has been first developed, but assuming the broader perspective of Joan Tronto who defined care as “everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible” (Tronto, 1993) it might also be possible to consider other forms of wayfinding systems in relation to the concept of care, or as an act of care themselves. Moreover, in this concept of care, Tronto extends the idea not only to the human being but also to the surrounding environment, including in it also the inanimate environment and the more-than-human world (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Care in design has been addressed in a variety of shapes but when dealing with public space, we can assume the perspective that Manzini expresses in his book *Livable proximity* (2021) and that deepens its roots in the definitions of care given both by Tronto (1993) and Puig de la Bellacasa (2017). Manzini states that the city of proximity can be seen as the city of care, in which the capacity of care is expressed by an intertwining of people, associations, services, products and places (Manzini, 2021). This

intertwinement facilitates a series of social practices that enables and sustains the social, cultural and physical environment that we are part of. This kind of care necessitates proximity to better express itself, both relational and functional (Manzini, 2021), and, as well as planning, one of the tools able to shorten the distance is a proper system of communication on the territory, a proper wayfinding system.

### An overview of wayfinding

Going back to the concept of wayfinding it is possible to define it as a spatial problem-solving process that each person put into action when s/he needs to reach a destination in a pre-defined environment (Arthur & Passini, 1992; Lynch, 1960). While performing this activity, the user could be supported by a system of signs, made of physical and digital elements. A wayfinding system as part of an identity system, sends messages about the environment in which it is located, contributing to the perception of the space itself (Mollerup, 2005). While doing so, wayfinding systems also convey information about that given place, not only about the orientation but also about the meaning of the place itself. Looking at it from a communication design perspective, a wayfinding system can be seen as a communication tool able to mediate the communication process between the user, considered as the receiver, and the environment itself, considered as the sender of the message (Zingale, 2012). When this environment (or sender) is an urban public space (Carmona et al, 2003; Gehl, 2011; Manzini, 2021), this process became more complex, being related to a place that is not only made by its physical and architectural elements but also made by the stories, cultures and backgrounds of its inhabitants and of all the living entities coexisting within that space (Volli, 2008). To give the chance to all these elements to emerge, and not to be summarized in a singularity or represented by the strongest one (Remotti, 1996), wayfinding systems should be the expression of the plurality of subjects living within that place, and of the stratification of meaning that each architectural or physical elements have experienced through the years (Marrone, 2009; Pezzini, 2008). Being informative systems about the place, wayfinding systems can help not only in the process of identification of the place but also in the process of restoring and communicating its meaning. Wayfinding can provide an experience of cognitive and environmental well-being, improving the perception of the space and reducing the sense of unfamiliarity with it (Zingale, 2012) helping the construction of a personal mental image of a space. A good mental image (Golledge, 1999), among its other functions, gives an important feeling of emotional security allowing the person to establish a good relationship with the surrounding world and enhancing the feeling to be home (Lynch, 1960) and the perception of safety and belonging to that place. For the citizens to feel a sense of belonging to the place they live within, is one of the key factors that contribute to the resilience of urban systems (Pasqui, 2020), and recognizing the value of that place goes along with the feeling of well-being (Manzini, 2015).

### Wayfinding as caring

As we have seen, the three main functions of wayfinding systems can be summarized as:

- » Orienting, see Figure 1;
- » Informing, see Figure 2;
- » Conveying a sense of belonging to the place.



**Figure 1.** Examples of wayfinding systems for orientation in the city centers of Milan, Brunico, London (project by Applied), Rome and Venice



**Figure 2.** Examples of informative wayfinding systems in Milan, Berlin, Brunico and Asinara.

If we link these three features to the concept of care, we can say that wayfinding can be related to it for the following three reasons:

1. Wayfinding could enable proximity within an urban space;
2. Wayfinding can be an act of care towards the cultural and architectural heritage that it gives information about;
3. Wayfinding can be an act of care toward the people conveying a sense of belonging to that place.

Starting from the first reason (1), we can see how the main function of wayfinding systems, orienting people, could be a way to facilitate proximity both in the city and in the neighborhood. Of course, we are not talking just about a kind of wayfinding addressed to tourists, but we are talking also about a wayfinding system that helps the citizens in finding the closer, primary and secondary functions of the urban area (Jacobs, 1961) and that makes them easier to deal with the complexity of the everyday life improving a sense of well-being (Baur, 2013). This kind of wayfinding can also be a facilitator for the interactions among different actors on the territory, making available to everyone the information about the territory itself and enabling the proximity that is a first step towards the city of care (Manzini 2021). This role as an informative system leads us to the next point (2) which sees wayfinding as a way to take care (Tronto, 1993) of the cultural and architectural heritage. While conveying information about the history and the stories of the place, informative signs can be a way to preserve, keep alive and pass from one person to the other the stratification of different meanings of a place overlapped through the years. Moreover, assuming the idea that for a place to keep on existing, there should be someone or something that talks about it (Manzini 2105), it is possible to see how wayfinding systems can be a tool to

talk about the place and to express the different meanings stratified in it through time. In this function, wayfinding could be seen both as a place-making activity and as an act of care towards the built and living environment. Both the functions of wayfinding systems that we have seen till now, contribute to building a sense of belonging for the person to the place leading us to the next point (3). A well-designed wayfinding system helps in building the value of a place for the people who live within it, conveying a sense of belonging and a consequent feeling of well-being for the people. This is another way, for the wayfinding system, to take care of the inhabitants of an urban area and so to be an act of care itself.

## Methodologies to design a caring wayfinding system

When we talk about wayfinding systems, we usually talk about a set of signs, made of physical and digital elements, behind which there is, of course, a group of people designing them. A multidisciplinary team that tries to convey this sense of care towards things and people, through a wayfinding system. But how can they do that? When dealing with wayfinding, designers usually follow a complex process that we can divide into three main phases: pre-design, design and post-design (Calori & Vanden-Eynden, 2015). While the design phase is the creative one and the post-design phase is the implementation phase (Gibson & Pullman, 2009) the one that most interests us is the pre-design phase. This phase is mainly the research phase made of data collection and analysis of the place. It starts with an analysis of the place that begins off-site to then goes on with a site inspection to verify the knowledge gained through the desk research. This is the part in which the designers gain knowledge about the place they will work on. There are different ways in which it can be carried on, some of them are just informative and some of them are more empathic both to the people and to the territory itself. Through the years, with the rising of the user-centered approach and of the idea of caring about people, the second one started to be more used and to prove more effective for the design of more efficient wayfinding systems. Some methods, such as surveys, interviews and focus groups, were integrated into the research phase. These tools were a first way to start considering the real needs of the users and a first way to start taking care of them. In the last years this direction of placing the people at the center, and with them, their needs towards others and the surrounding environment, gained more and more importance while wayfinding became one of the paths towards place-making. For this reason, some wayfinding designers started to move from surveys to more participatory activities in the direction of a co-design process. This is one of the methodologies that we will explore as relating to the idea of care. If co-design has already been used and proved useful in designing wayfinding systems, the other one that we will see, ethnosemiotics, has still few applications in the wayfinding field, even if it is suitable for it in the perspective of caring.

## Co-design

Co-designing is a well know design practice that has taken place among wayfinding designers as well. It is made of participatory activities that aim to involve the community in the design practices and in doing so the user becomes an active and critical component of the design process (Sanders,

2002). A co-design process that properly involves the final users also promotes the well-being of people engaging them (Fumagalli et al., 2020). The co-design and participatory practices are recognized methodologies in the place-making activity (Manzini, 2015) and by extension in wayfinding design since we have seen how much wayfinding can contribute to the construction of the meaning of a place. Looking at the contemporary wayfinding projects in public spaces it is possible to see how much the planning of participatory activities is taking place in the pre-design process. Co-design applied to wayfinding goes in the direction of caring about the people, being a way for the people to feel involved and enhance a sense of belonging (3) while exploring their need to be connected with other actors in the neighborhood (1).

## Ethnosemiotics

Ethnosemiotics is a methodology that in the last years has started to be used in the design field as well. As stated by the name, it has its roots deepening in the fields of ethnography and semiotics both disciplines widely used in the design area. If we start looking at one of these fields alone, ethnography, we can say that can be considered a design practice to express care and empathy (Cortés-López, 2021). For this reason, by extension also ethnosemiotics, can have this role since it applies the semiotic lens to the ethnographic tools (Donatiello & Mazzarino, 2017). Moreover, ethnosemiotics has the ambition not only to observe objects in their natural environment but also to understand how they interact with each other (Galofaro, 2020). This feature could be an essential characteristic for wayfinding designers who need to deal with an urban environment with the aim of taking care both of the built environment and of the living entities that populate it. For this reason, ethnosemiotics could be a good way not only to care about the people but also to care about the surrounding environment and about the relationships that occur among them.

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