
Butler Library displays vital signs

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Signage as a remedy for environmental problems.

The frequent comment among faculty and students when they initially entered E. H. Butler Library at Buffalo State College was: "Where do you go?—what a maze—I'll come back later...!" These comments were not taken lightly by the staff of the library and a planning process was begun in the early 1980s to rectify this situation. An environmental planner was hired as a consultant and by working through a planning process new signage was implemented throughout the building. This is the first phase of a program that will eventually renovate and revitalize the entire facility. The purpose of the signage is to make the library a more pleasant and "human" space and to create a productive atmosphere for staff and students.

Located on the campus of the State University College at Buffalo, the E.H. Butler Library features a collection of over 465,000 books and 2,100 current periodicals, in addition to 500,000 microforms and other non-print media. The library also houses the college Archives and Special Collections, the Creative Studies Collection, Curriculum Laboratory, Learning Systems Center, a micro-computer laboratory and a special services center for the visually handicapped.

With a facility of this size, efficient client circu-

lation is, clearly, very important. Yet, for many years an ineffective signage system prevailed. The college serves a diverse student and faculty population whose research and teaching interests represent a comprehensive curriculum. Studies compiled by the library indicate that most users were either confused by the building pattern, which is divided into four quadrants connected by corridors, or hampered by a limited amount of time needed to locate appropriate resources quickly.

Although Butler Library offered some identification signage that had been installed when the building was constructed in 1968, it was not effective in moving people through the space. Directional guidance was primarily achieved through hand-out maps and verbal instruction. The latter, unfortunately, resulted in a sizable cumulative time loss to library staff.

In response to the need for better identification and directional information, a myriad of signs in a wide array of sizes and colors began to appear. Despite the best efforts of the library's environmental services committee, more and larger signs competed for attention. Ultimately, the lack of organization and continuity among the many styles of signs only compounded circulation problems.

The process

To investigate this situation and propose new approaches, the director organized a committee of librarians led by the assistant to the director. This group determined that signage was a visible part of a larger and more subtle problem with interior space planning and circulation. Under the assistant to the director's leadership, the group outlined a multiphased program to renovate and revitalize the library, with signage system development as its first objective. The group also elected to retain a design consultant to address the initial phase.

Working closely with the assistant to the director and the signage committee, the project designer proposed circulation plans, signage location drawings, message schedules and design criteria. These tools helped to establish parameters for conceptual design as well as the necessary documentation from which bid specifications were later produced.

The project team assembled a bid package and, working through the State University systems procurement mechanism, eventually selected fabricators for the various signage components. The project designer remained involved to review samples and submittals, schedule fabrication and installation and to review and approve the final products.

Design of the system

The resulting signage concepts addressed the principal issue of movement within the building but also paid special attention to more involved environmental changes in the planning stage. For instance, it was determined that the fundamental method employed to orient visitor circulation would be to color-code the building's four quadrants. Hence signs, depending on their location, would use the appropriate quadrant color. Also it was agreed that the signs would complement the building's modernistic architecture. This indicated that the signs would employ a visible dimension or depth and also soften the angular design of the building. Finally, the design team concurred that the signs should be visible against the building's interior. To accomplish this it was determined that the signs would utilize radiused ends and display bright colors to define quadrants.

The signage system begins to work as soon as one enters the E. H. Butler Library. A cluster of four sculptural kiosks greet the visitor midway through the lobby. Designed to contrast with the very massive and hard-edged architectural elements, the kiosks appear at first to be cylindrical forms split longitudinally. On the flat faces of two of the kiosks, a directory and collection of floor plan drawings serve to acquaint visitors with the services and departments available in the upper level and main level quadrants. The floor plans are rendered in perspective to assist the viewer in perceiving the building's three levels in relation to one another. These floor plans also provide the first exposure to the color-coding of the building's four quadrants.

Two additional kiosks provide surfaces for changing information on meetings and classes, as well as a tack surface for notices.

The next signage element a visitor to the library might encounter would probably be a directory/floor plan wall plaque. Constructed of 3/4-inch pressed hardwood and featuring radiused top and bottom, these signs are prominently mounted for visitors exiting the main stairwell on the two upper levels. These signs show a perspective rendering of the appropriate floor plan, as well as a mini-directory of frequently used rooms and departments. They work in conjunction with the lobby kiosks to reinforce travel intentions and aid in the understanding of quadrant color-coding.

Moving further into the space, visitors continue to benefit from carefully located directional signs. These support the directory/floor plan signs as they point the way to frequently used areas. They also relate by virtue of the radiused top and bottom which becomes the fundamental characteristic for all plaque-style signs.

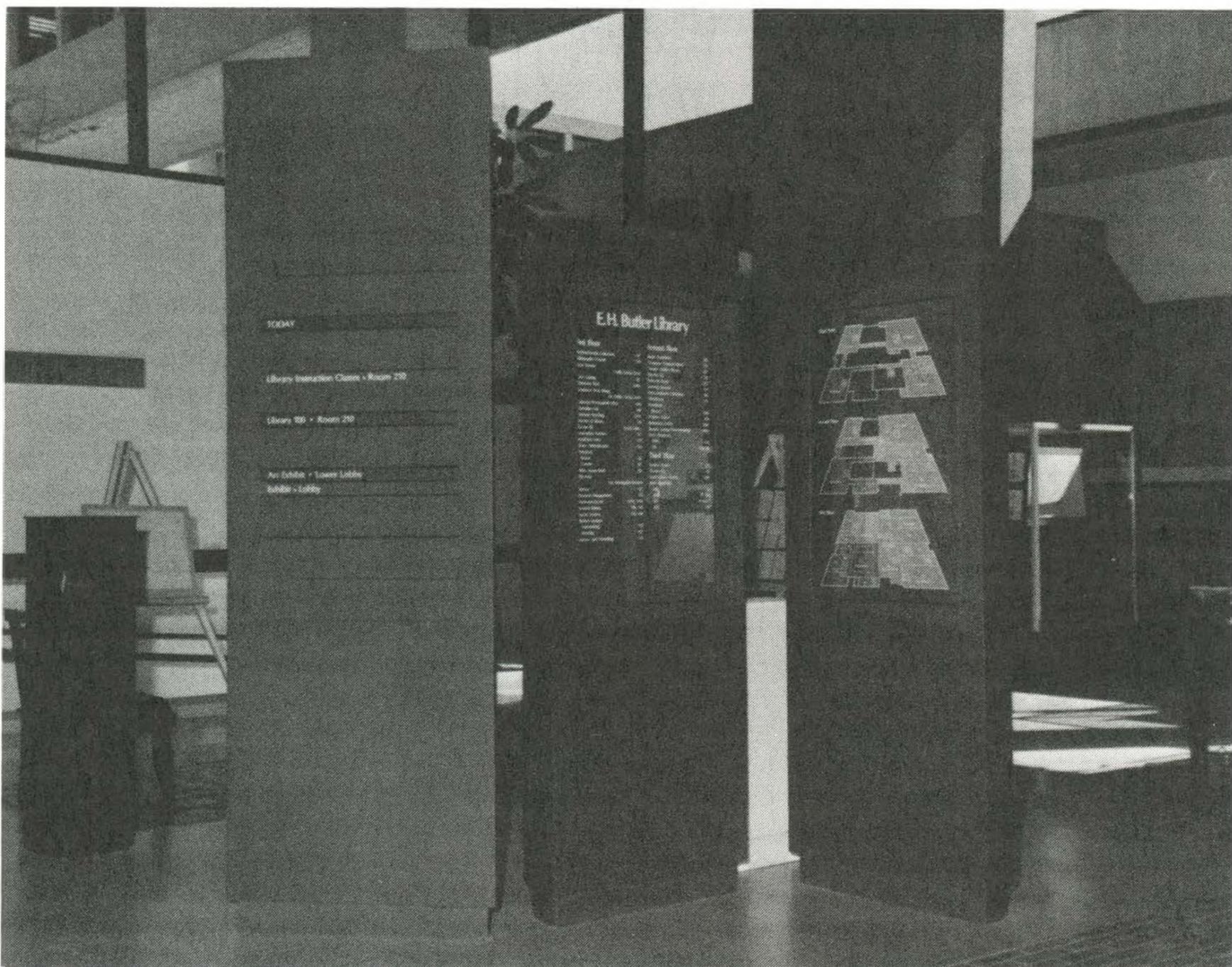
Restroom, directional, level designation and general room identification signage were designed to contrast the modernistic architecture with radiused tops and bottoms, as well as deeply beveled edges. In keeping with the massiveness of the building though, the plaque-style signs were machined from pressed hardwood at a hefty thickness of 5/8". Individual signs were then lacquer-sprayed in their designated quadrant colors. Messages were printed in white over the colored fields in the omnipresent optima medium typeface.

In several cases the angle of visitor approach or scale of the entry precluded using the normal room identification plaque. For these situations, six or seven-foot wide panels with four-inch letters are positioned above entry doors or counters. Here again, the ends of the panels are radiused and white lettering is applied over quadrant referencing color.

An interesting observation of the signage system is that the color-coding is never directly referenced in the signage nomenclature. Due to existing catalog referencing, the quadrants were already named Southeast (SE), Northwest (NW), etc. As such, the design team could not justify adding "Blue Quadrant" to the name already employed for the Northeast Quadrant. Rather, they determined to use color only as reinforcement.

Impact

It is impossible to determine how many hours were saved in no longer having to give directions. But the success of the signage system in logically and efficiently leading people through the library is very evident. The new signage patterns in E. H. Butler Library have enhanced the learning environment, helped to make the library more "user friendly," reassured people using the facility that they can locate resources easily, and helped to provide more efficient service.



Kiosks with library directory and floor plans.

Yet the dynamic impact of the signage system is only the first step in a multi-disciplinary assault on environmental problems. The next phase of the library's revitalization is the renovation of the lobby. Beyond this, further space planning, interior de-

sign for service areas, and environmental graphics will create an environment to meet the challenge of the information technology age. The integrated design approach manifested in this program is quite literally...written on the walls. ■■

NYPL wins architectural award

The New York Public Library was one of fourteen recipients of the American Institute of Architects 1986 Honor Awards, the profession's highest recognition for design excellence. The Library was chosen for its project to restore the D. Samuel and Jeane H. Gottesman Exhibition Hall, originally completed in 1911.

Architects were charged with installing modern electrical, lighting, and HVAC systems while retaining the original character of the room. Special shades were developed to protect artwork from natural light; chandelier reproductions were styled to echo the hall's early 20th-century lighting while using modern lighting technology; and the magnificent carved-wood ceiling was returned to its original grandeur.

The awards jury commented that the architects "have very successfully added modern lighting and other essential systems without disturbing the integrity and beauty of the original, rare carved-wood ceiling. The rebirth of the hall has returned not only a great exhibition space to its former glory, but has satisfied one of the most important functions of architecture—bringing beauty and delight where once it had been snuffed out."

The Honor Awards have been presented at the 1986 American Institute of Architects National Convention in San Antonio, June 8-11. The architects who performed the restoration are Davis, Brody & Associates and Giorgio Cavaglieri Architects, both from New York City. ■■

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