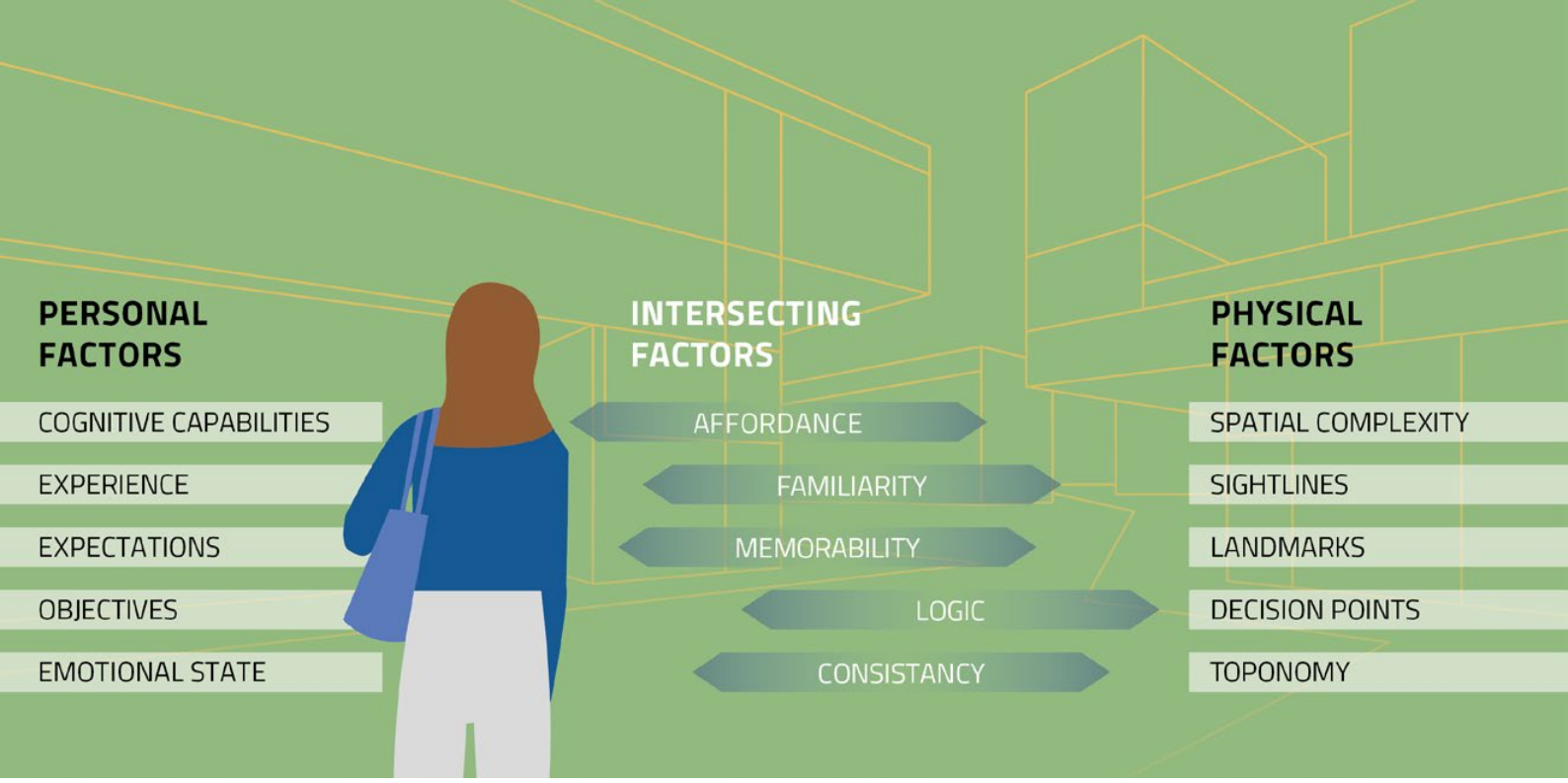

Triagonal®

WAYFINDING EMPOWERS

- improving the User Journey through Wayfinding Design

By Triagonal Information Design

Remember the anecdote from "Alice in Wonderland", where Alice asks the Cheshire cat to show her the way; The cat asked, "Where do you want to go?" "I don't know," Alice answered. "Then," said the cat, "it really doesn't matter, does it?"

When you do know where you want to go, it does matter how you get there. It matters whether you get there on your own or whether you need to ask someone for help or whether you're running late as a result of getting lost along the way. Good wayfinding enables users to go where they want to go - as easily and intuitively as possible. It requires a thorough understanding of both human behaviour and of the factors influencing our perception of physical spaces to provide them with the best experience when navigating in unfamiliar and complex environments. And, while good real-time wayfinding strategies in themselves empower, the added value of encompassing means to prepare the user for the journey, on all relevant platforms, should not be underestimated.

Navigators are individuals with their own unique set of demographic, social and cultural characteristics, their individual backdrop of prior experiences, and their own individual emotional and cognitive capabilities. In addition first-time users of complex environments may be marked by nervousness or anxiety so *"we must also take into consideration differences in users' abilities to be attentive to, and move in, the environment, and to reach intended destinations."*[1]

Empowering them to find their own way starts with an understanding of what supports our navigation and of the interplay between capabilities, intuition, emotional state and prior experience.

[1] Ibrahim, M. (2019): *Effects of Art and Design on Orientation in Healthcare Architecture: A study of wayfinding and wayshowing in a Swedish hospital setting,* Architecture and built environment, Faculty of Engineering, Lund University

Good wayfinding responds to the needs for reassurance arising every time a new user enters an unfamiliar environment – by offering guidance from the outset of the journey along the way to successfully arriving at the intended destination.

Navigators operate in two different modes when finding their way as we tend to take in our surroundings and the information provided by our surroundings. One mode implies taking in and processing information at the beginning and at certain intervals throughout the journey, often by standing still, creating a mental map of what is ahead and deciding in which direction to proceed. The other mode focuses on carrying out those decisions and navigating concurrently with moving towards the destination. Just as we are different in terms of our capabilities in finding our way unaided, we also relate to the stimuli provided in very different ways. *"The type of sequence in which a way-searcher moves is not always obvious, in the sense that it can be hard to actually pinpoint what comes first: perception of the environment, mental mapping, or moving. Nor is the order in which one navigates (or acts intuitively) with the help of visual objects or by way of seeking explicit information self-evident, and this could vary from case to case."* [2]

This insight does not come by itself; it requires in-depth studies and stakeholder engagement to gain sufficient knowledge of the dynamics of how we encounter the complexity of unfamiliar environments. Just as importantly, wayfinding planning requires an understanding of how the characteristics and typologies of the built environment and so-called affordances effect how we as individuals perceive and respond to our surroundings. Affordance translates into what objects or environmental features offer us as clues of their use and purpose – of their real and perceived characteristics. [3] Just like any artefact can be designed in a way, which helps us understand its function and usage – in line with one of the universal design rules; *Good design makes a product understandable.* [4] In the same way buildings can be designed, organised and detailed in a way that helps users intuitively orientate themselves. Examples of how architecture in itself can serve as guidance can be found in the visual dominance of entrances, in clear definition of public space from private space and in the ability to visually separate one functional zone from another. [5]

Such guiding factors are rarely built sufficiently into the physical space itself. In environments like hospitals or airports – or in any large, multi-functional building complex – bespoke wayfinding strategies have to be developed for each individual environment. They must be based on a thorough analysis of the user flows and user behaviour in the space at hand – accentuating helpful, and toning down adverse factors – in order to cater for each individual user population and they should be guided by an ambition to create a wayfinding system that enables the optimum intuitive journey.

Wayfinding assisted by designed elements like landmarks, signs, maps or hand-held devices tend to be most effective when those remain largely unnoticed by our conscience. In other words they should not require a large amount of mental processing prior to deciding on which way to move. When a wayfinding design is done well, we tend to take it for granted and this quality can be achieved by designing, organising and positioning wayfinding elements with the principles of simplicity, coherence, consistancy and ease-of-perception in mind and by grouping information in hierarchic ways. In short, clues from the environment – whether environmental affordances or man-made navigational aids – should ideally trigger our intuition and unconsciously inform our behaviour and movements.

When at its best a wayfinding system responds to the individual needs of every new user entering an unfamiliar environment – by offering varied means of guidance catering for as many individual intuitive ways of navigation as possible. It should be conceived and developed on the basis of solid evidence of how we as human beings react to the often overpowering complexity of certain environments, how the effects of this complexity can be negotiated, and how this knowledge translates into strategies that accommodate and enable intuitive user journeys. Good wayfinding enables an intuitive journey, where minimum effort has to be invested in taking in and processing instructions, thereby leaving the user free to prepare for whatever the intention of his or her journey.

[2] Ibrahim, M. (2019): *Effects of Art and Design on Orientation in Healthcare Architecture: A study of wayfinding and wayshowing in a Swedish hospital setting,* Architecture and built environment, Faculty of Engineering, Lund University

[3] Gibson, J.J. (1979): *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception and Norman,* D. (1988): *The Design of Everyday Things*

[4] Rams, D. *Ten Principles of "Good Design"*

[5] Rooke, CN. (2012): *Improving Wayfinding in old and complex hospital environments,* Diss. The University of Salford, UK