

MASCO PEDESTRIAN SIGN PROGRAM: YES, YOU CAN GET HERE FROM THERE FROM THERE



How hard is it to navigate the Longwood Area on foot?

“The probability of confusion is huge,” says Stephen Dill, Marketing Manager at Wheelock College.

“Did you know there are actually two Shapiro Centers in the LMA—in two different places?” asks Elizabeth Ng Liu, a planner at Brigham and Women’s Hospital.

“Many institutions have multiple points of egress,” observes Patrick Bibbins of Boston Children’s Hospital. “Some ‘buildings’ are made up of several buildings.”

All true, but even so, the situation is improving dramatically thanks to a new pedestrian wayfinding system developed by MASCO and now installed throughout the LMA. To do more to help visitors once they get out of their cars, or off the T or shuttle bus, the pedestrian system completes the wayfinding project MASCO began five years ago, when it updated the area’s vehicular signage.

This was no ordinary challenge. A good number of the daily visitors to the LMA have never been here before. People arrive every day from different parts of the country and all over the world. English is a second language for many. “Think of the effect on a patient coming into the LMA,” said Children’s Bibbins, who served on MASCO’s signage design committee. “Seeing a thoughtfully conceived system of helpful map kiosks and signs reinforces your impression of Boston as a world-class medical destination.”



But creating better pedestrian orientation was only one of the program's objectives. The other was to enhance a visitor's sense of the LMA as an increasingly diverse Boston neighborhood, with a special ambience and character of its own. "The new signage emphasizes the enormous synergy here," said Sherri Rullen of the Dana Farber Cancer Institute. "Harvard Medical School, the hospitals, the research centers - these are powerful relationships. And then there are the cultural and educational institutions. The new signs and kiosks tell the story of a very special place." Whichever of the LMA's 23 institutions you're looking for, the new Sign Program will make it a lot easier to find your destination.

Finding ways to collaborate.

So how do you design a wayfinding system in such a complex environment with so many institutions and City agencies to satisfy?

"Slowly and carefully," says MASCO's Vice President for Operations, David Eppstein, who chaired the committee that oversaw the project. "With every challenge we faced, it was a matter of achieving the right balance. Functionality versus aesthetics. The locations we wanted versus those that were available. The wishes of Institution A versus those of Institution B. Compromises were inevitable, but, thanks to everyone's goodwill and hard work, the finished product has a consistent and unifying look to it."

Working together is a well-established tradition among MASCO members. Brigham's Liu said, "You'd think there would have been lots of conflict, but there wasn't. No one tried to benefit their own institution at the expense of the larger priorities."

Designing to Find Ways.

Map kiosks play a critical role in the new pedestrian orientation system. As Bibbins pointed out, "There is no church spire in the LMA, no feature visible from everywhere that you can look at and orient yourself."

To make each kiosk as useful as possible, large area maps on one side of the kiosks and detail maps on the other were designed to enhance pedestrian orientation. As a further source of assistance, the large area map on each kiosk displays a QRC code. Scan it with your smartphone and it will take you straight to MASCO's information-rich website.



The design firm Roll-Barresi also developed directional signs for major intersections. “Maps are great,” principal designer Andrew Barresi noted, “but sometimes you just want to answer the question ‘What’s down that street?’”

By the way, if you’ve ever wondered about the distinctive typeface used on LMA signage, it’s Frutiger. According to Barresi, “Frutiger is not only highly legible; it comes in many weights, which makes it easy to create hierarchies of information on the signs.” Frutiger and the color palette the designers use combine to make the signs pop out of the visually busy LMA environment.

Already thinking ahead.

Signage in the LMA has been a work-in-progress for a quarter of a century and regular upgrades are built into the process. New technology will enhance its usefulness.

“It is a fine, well integrated system,” says Elizabeth Ng Liu of Brigham and Women’s Hospital, “but before too long, I think you’ll be able to just enter your doctor’s name in your phone and be guided straight to the office. The capability is already implicit in your phone’s technology. That will be cool.” Of course, you’ll still need that sign telling you where you are.