

Signage Design Process: Architectural Afterthought or Important Element?

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In a continuing series on the role signage has in architecture, Gaelite suggests that well designed signage can add to the aesthetics and functionality of a building. A professional design service ensures excellence in signage and compliments the architecture of a building.

The relationship between architecture and signage should be a strong one. More often than not there is an uncomfortable juxtaposition. In Ireland's current built-up environment it seems that signage at best is an architectural afterthought. At worst buildings can be completely ruined by the use of large inappropriate fascias and crude lettering.

This article offers an insight into the signage design process.

Consultation

Central to the process is consideration of the client's requirements. Often the top priority is brand identity. Whether this be maintaining an existing identity or the creation of a new identity.

The main client requirements are to make their building recognisable and distinctive. To direct the flow of traffic through the development. To be well positioned and sympathetic to the architecture and surroundings and comply with planning regulations. Signs "should not obscure architectural features such as cornices or window openings in the area. On new buildings they should be part of the integral design" (Page 144, Dublin City Development Plan 2005-11).

Also of importance is the client's aesthetic ideas. Their input into the appearance of the product is considered.

Strategy

Practical information required includes a full site survey, digital photographs, and architectural drawings. The issues that are dealt with include the flow of pedestrian and vehicular traffic within the development. It is analysed in order to develop the best way-finding system. The foundation of the signage strategy is based on user type and their cardinal point of entry and exit. The strategy also includes highlighting main entrances and utilities through correct positioning of the signage.

This stage also looks beyond the functionality of getting people into a building or letting them know where to park. Sign strategy has to factor in aesthetic elements. Corporate identity guidelines, including artwork are required. The best ways to translate the brand into signage are reviewed. Signage is predominantly a tool of communication, and it has to be seen in terms of an organisation's brand identity.

Design

Information gathered at the consultation and strategy stages sets the parameters for the design of the signage. It dictates the size and structural elements of the sign. The proposed design is reviewed by the production team to ensure it's feasibility. The brand identity and communication goals of an organisation will determine the aesthetics. Both of these factors must comply with planning regulations. Other influences include architecture, the surrounding environment, lighting, materials and cost. As Signage is a form of visual communication it is essential that we achieve the best standards in legibility through appropriate type face, colour, size and layout. Visually impaired and special needs users are considered at this stage.

Visualisation

At this stage of the process proposals are presented to the client showing how a particular sign will look on a building through use of architectural drawings or digital photography where applicable. Detailed technical specifications outlining the structural information are also produced. These specifications should be signed off by engineers before going into production.

Production

Architecture and signs depend upon production values being true to the concept. Materials and craftsmanship must translate the goals of the design concept. Gaelite has very specialised production departments with experts in light engineering, paint, neon, vinyl, digital printing and plastic that can ensure design is implemented effectively. The highest quality materials are used and are recyclable where possible.

Installation

The final step in the process, correct installation, ensures that design values are not compromised. Signage is installed by dedicated, safe pass certified crews with many years of experience, trained in using hoists, scaffolding, and health and safety. Crews attend site inductions and should safely dismantle and dispose of unwanted signage, already in situ.

Maintenance

Signs have a certain life span and need to be maintained to ensure that they continue to achieve their design objectives. Yearly servicing of signs is recommended to ensure their optimum presentation.

Conclusion

Effective signage is produced when there is a well conceived design, that is aesthetically sound, and functions efficiently to meet client requirements. This can be achieved if Architects and Sign Manufacturers collaborate at the early stages of the design process.