

# HOW TO BUILD A BETTER VISITOR MAP: THE 5 A'S AND 10 C'S

by Dennis O'Brien

The following five procedural steps, and ten design principals can be useful when you attempt your next map redesign, whether you are at a large institution or a small one, and whether you produce the map in-house or hire an outside contractor.

## The Map Design and Illustration Process: The 5 A's

**1. ATTITUDE.** Map design is a detail oriented activity in which most everyone has a strong opinion. Take a deep breath, stay calm and be patient. It is important to communicate regularly with everyone directly involved throughout the project. You want the map you produce to attractively represent your institution's image, work well for visitor wayfinding, and last for many years, so it is more important to get it done right than done fast.

**2. APPROACH.** Ideally, you want to come up with a map that will last for at least five years. It should be designed and illustrated in such a way so that it is easy to change as needed, and still be relatively inexpensive to print in the quantities you need. The following is a rough blueprint for the process:

a. Establish the project parameters. Who will be directly involved? Who will have final authority? What will be the true uses for the new map? Write a contract, even if the map is to be produced in-house.

b. Gather all the opinions of staff, visitors, and trustees. Find all the visual source material you can, including photographs, old maps, and surveys.

c. Sketch at least two preliminary versions of the map. Try out different illustration styles in these sketches.

d. Critique and review the sketches. Now is the time to pick one illustration style you will use for the final art, and stick to it.

e. Draw a much more refined version of the map. This should be an accurate layout for the final version.

f. Critique and review this art very carefully for accuracy. You might try testing copies of this version with your visitors.

g. Illustrate final art, including final versions of all the text and labels that will be on the map itself.

h. Evaluate the printed maps by conducting a visitor survey.

i. Incorporate the comments from the survey into the map for the second printing.

**3. AUDIENCE.** Early in the process, it is vital to decide why you are going through this map remake, and to what purpose it will be put. Is it going to be used only by visitors on the grounds? Are you going to use it on your web site? Do you want to incorporate the new map into a marketing scheme? A map designed strictly for on-grounds visitor wayfinding can look very different from a map intended for marketing. A visitor wayfinding map can be produced in one or two colors, but must have all buildings, features, and visitor services clearly marked. A map used for marketing should be more colorful and portray your institution in the most favorable light, but the labeling can be kept to a minimum. When an institution tries to save time and money by stretching a printed piece to serve more than one function, the piece often ends up being inadequate for all functions.

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**4. AUTHORITY.** No matter how many people are involved in the process, make sure that only one person has final, absolute, authority for all decisions. If an ultimate authority is not established from the beginning, a person with higher authority may come along at some time and negate all work to that point. This is especially important if the designer/illustrator is an outside contractor. An outside person will probably work very closely with only one person, but will know nothing about where that person fits in the corporate structure.

**5. AGREEMENT.** Make sure that all details of the project are clearly stated in writing from the beginning, so that everyone involved knows the overall goals plus his or her specific responsibilities. This is vital if the designer/illustrator is an outside contractor.

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## Design and Illustration Principals: The 10 C's

**1. CLARITY.** A map is clear when a visitor can see what is on the map, read it, and understand it. The most important graphic elements in maps are legibility, visual contrast, figure-ground relationship, and hierarchical structure.

Example: Your institution has a Visitor Center you wish to emphasize. The picture of the building should be in bright colors against a neutral background (figure-ground relationship). The label for the building should be large relative to other labels (hierarchical structure), very dark against a light background (contrast), and printed in an accepted type face such as Bodoni or Helvetica (legibility).

**2. COMFORT.** A visitor should be psychologically and physically comfortable while using your map.

Example: If your map is printed clearly, in pleasing tones, large enough type, uses internationally accepted symbols, and relates well to the real space it represents, then it is psychologically comfortable. It is physically so if it is printed on sturdy, non-glare paper in an easily handled size (no larger than approximately 17" x 24").

**3. COMPLETENESS.** If a map needs something that is not there, it is incomplete.

Example: If your institution is located on the edge of a cliff or river, some clear and obvious warning on the map should bring the hazard to the attention of the visitors.

**4. CONCISENESS.** A map should include all the information needed in internationally recognized form, but no more. Simpler is better

Example: If your institution has buildings that are attributed to specific donors (The John F. and Jane M. Doe Memorial Snack Bar), the map is not the place to include the full name (Snack Bar).

**5. CONSISTENCY.** Use symbols and other graphic elements consistently throughout the map and on the explanation key.

Example: If you use the international symbol for restrooms at 3/8" high on the map, use exactly the same symbol at exactly the same size and treatment in the key.

**6. CONTROL.** Evaluate your map periodically and objectively. Be willing to reprint corrected versions of the map according to the findings of the evaluation.

Example: Design and conduct a visitor evaluation of your map. Do it in-house or in conjunction with an independent evaluator.

**7. CORRECTNESS.** Since all maps are abstractions this is difficult. A map is correct when it contains no overt errors.

Example: Place map elements as close as possible to where they belong. Minimize distortion in the representation of large areas, such as the overall size and shape of the institution property. Minimize misspellings, omissions, mislabels, and obsolete inclusions. Keep the map current.

**8. CORRELATION.** The map should agree with the facility it represents in overall layout and in its details.

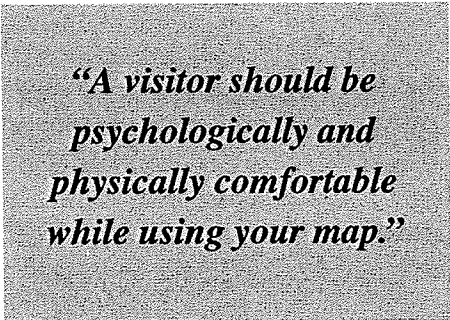
Example: Even though visitors receive a map after they leave the parking lot, it is a good thing to include at least part of the lot as a general navigation aid and to help make the exit easier at the end of the trip when the visitor is tired and the kids are cranky.

**9. CREATIVE.** A map should be interesting to look at.

Example: Your institution could be drawn from a perspective straight overhead, but it would be much more interesting to look at a picture map drawn from a "bird's-eye-view" or 3/4 view showing some of the details of the sides of the buildings. This type of view also makes landmark recognition easier and is more enjoyable for visitors.

**10. CURRENT.** A map should be kept up to date.

*Dennis O'Brien is a freelance illustrator and cartographer and has designed and illustrated visitor maps for clients around the country. He holds an MA in Illustration from Syracuse University and has worked as an archaeologist, exhibit designer, and illustrator for the American Museum of Natural History.*



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