Chapter 3

Legible London: mobilising the pedestrian

# Spencer Clark, Philip Pinch and Suzanne Reimer

# Introduction

This chapter examines the design of the Legible London pedestrian wayfinding system. Overseen by Transport for London (TfL), this innovative scheme for enabling walking has developed from an early prototype study in 2007 to become a key part of transport policy in the UK’s capital city (AIG 2006, 2007; Arquati 2008; TfL 2014). An integrated combination of signs, pedestrian focused mapping and other directional information, Legible London has two complementary aims; to help people plan journeys on foot; and to give people the confidence to walk and explore. The scheme consists of a city-wide, consistent, pedestrian navigation system encompassing on-street wayfinding elements supported by identical information in public transport nodes (e.g. tube stations and bus stops) and paper based products as well as ongoing development of the provision of digital mapping information. The current on-street system is comprised of a mixture of information boards, known as ‘liths’ that come in a standardised range of sizes (see Figure 3.1), directional fingerposts, wall mounted signs and a range of supporting printed maps located in bus stops and inside tube stations. Information on all liths is presented in a hierarchical fashion: a top yellow beacon locates the sign in busy urban environments, directional information is given to nearby points of interest (replicating traditional finger signs), whilst differently scaled ‘planner’ and ‘finder’ maps locate the lith within 15 minute and 5 minute walk scales respectively. A street index also is provided.

<FIGURE 3.1 HERE>

The Legible London scheme has its origins in research conducted by the London School of Economics on behalf of the consultancy Applied Information Group (AIG)[[1]](#endnote-1), which sought to understand existing wayfinding provision in Central London (Ichioka et al., 2005). Using this evidence base, AIG was commissioned by the Central London Partnership (a group of central London boroughs) to research potential barriers perceived by pedestrians, “to propose ways of dealing with them” and to understand how levels of walking in the capital might be increased (AIG 2006, 2007; Arquati 2008, 2). One of the most significant barriers was found to be wayfinding: a range of surveys reported that between 50% and 60% of Londoners would walk more if they had better wayfinding information (Clark 2008; Arquati 2008). Prior to the Legible London scheme, information systems across London had been isolated, incomplete, and lacked consistency, which was seen to discourage people from undertaking walking journeys.

The central aim of this chapter is to critically review the shape and nature of the Legible London scheme, highlighting the ways in which design decisions shape how and where people move around the city. Our discussion draws upon reports assessing the first Legible London prototypes trialled in Bond Street, central London (AIG 2007; TRL 2008; Colin Buchanan 2008); upon subsequent evaluations of the scheme (TfL 2014); and upon primary research conducted as part of Clark’s (2008) MA dissertation at London South Bank University. We begin by outlining the factors which led to the development of the scheme. The main body of the chapter considers the ways in which the Legible London initiative has sought to ‘order’ wayfinding in the capital, redefining how, where and who moves by suggesting destinations to pedestrians; installing information signs which are readable at specific vantages and locating this information at particular points in urban space. In doing so we consider the ways in which forms of physical mobility such as walking become meaningful (Cresswell 2006). A final section reflects upon the mobilisation of design by considering the travels of the Legible London scheme itself, as it has moved to become a template in a range of other cities across the globe.

# Origins of the scheme

A key driver for the scheme was TfL’s interest in alleviating a growing public transport burden. There is at one level a strong irony in the idea of a local government transport agency directly seeking to encourage people to opt out of its services! However, significant increases in London’s population have led to overloading of the transport network leading to disrupted and less pleasant journeys for commuters. The Greater London Authority (GLA Datastore 2016) reports that London's population has increased by around 113,000 people per year over the past five years, and is estimated to surpass 9 million in 2018 and 10 million by 2034, leading to continuing pressure on public transport infrastructure. Thus the Legible London initiative can be seen as a fascinating mobilisation of the pedestrian—that is, TfL has seen a need for the pedestrian to take on a public transport role.[[2]](#endnote-2) Walking has become conceptualised as a service in which TfL is centrally involved (TfL 2004). This vision more recently has been extended to cycling through bike-share and ‘cycle superhighways’ schemes and related infrastructure investments (GLA 2013).

Initial analysis by the consultancy AIG sought to ascertain factors that might prevent people from walking in London. Surveys (Clark 2008; AIG 2007) indicated that safety concerns (including the perceived danger of traffic congestion) typically presented barriers to walking. Wayfinding difficulties also were key, as we have indicated. More specifically, a consideration for both residents and tourists was the fact that the iconic London tube map was so frequently used as a wayfinder. In a survey of pedestrians exiting Leicester Square tube station in March 2005, AIG found that 45% used the tube map to plan their journey in advance (Ichioka et al., 2005; see also Bozatli et al’s 2004 New York research). Whilst the tube map is highly successful in assisting users to find a station and locality, it cannot guide them beyond the station itself for the potential onward walking leg of their trip. Further, the iconic London tube map of course is neither to scale nor geographically correct and as a result often encourages very short public transport journeys. For example, although many central London stops are just minutes apart, the tube map gives no sense of this. Thus whilst the tube map occupies a powerful position in people’s decision to wayfind with available tools, they are typically unaware of the tube map’s unsuitability for pedestrian navigation. The lack of suitable pedestrian focused alternatives—and the fact that existing systems were not fulfilling their intended purpose—were crucial factors in the design and implementation of Legible London.

# Theorising wayfinding: order and pedestrian mobilities

One of the most fascinating elements of the Legible London scheme is the extent to which it explicitly seeks to order pedestrian experiences and behaviour. This impetus for order derives from the ways in which wayfinding is understood and in this respect the scheme overtly draws upon urban planner Kevin Lynch’s (1960) understanding of mental mapping (Clark 2008, 10). Lynch (1960) classified the content of city images into five formal types of ‘image elements’ (paths, landmarks, edges, nodes and districts), which he suggested were used by people to order their understanding of urban built environments and to construct mental pictures to cue their navigational strategies. Edges denote boundaries between districts, which are areas that share common characteristics. Nodes are places of convergence and landmarks are distinctive objects. Lynch’s (1960) emphasis on the importance of clear “legibility” in the urban environment is unmistakeably evident in the naming of the London scheme.

Many discussions of wayfinding suggest that environment familiarity plays a key role. Golledge (1992) notes that people appear to prefer following repetitive routes that match their mental maps rather than explore alternatives; whilst Xia et al (2008) note that for unfamiliar environments, people use landmarks with support from signage, of which the latter is considered especially important. Landmarks may not always be used in the same way: Passini (1981) suggests that some individuals rely on signage to a greater extent and wayfind in a linear fashion whilst others navigate spatially making greater use of the general environment. Users also are seen to be more reliant upon signage in environments that are unfamiliar (Passini 1981); and there has been some discussion about gender differences in wayfinding strategies (Schmitz 1999; Xia et al 2008). General assumptions about the central importance of environmental landmarks can be seen to have fed directly into Legible London’s development of pedestrian wayfinding systems that utilise landmark features.

Predictability and the importance of ‘not getting lost’ can be seen as key elements of the Legible London strategy, again drawing upon central aspects of Lynch’s (1960) work (see also Passini 1996). Being lost is seen to be a frightening experience:

…let the mishap of disorientation once occur, and the sense of anxiety and even terror that accompanies it reveals to us how closely it is linked to our sense of balance and well-being. The very word “lost” in our language means much more than simple geographical uncertainty, it carries overtones of disaster.” (Lynch 1960, 4).

If being lost or simply the fear of being lost dissuades people from walking, it follows that providing improved wayfinding through pedestrian signage systems should encourage people to walk more often. AIG clearly reiterated such a view in their 2008 report:

In London, the problem of disorientation can be acute. People find many areas hard to understand and this induces considerable stress. The realisation of being ‘lost’ can be a negative feeling, bring on panic and a sense of impending disaster (2008, 13).

Some assumptions about wayfinding ‘on foot’ are seen to parallel wayfinding whilst driving. Burns (1998) stresses the importance of wayfinding in relation to the main reason for driving, which is to travel and reach a destination safely, conveniently and without assistance from outside sources wherever possible. As soon as a driver gets lost, takes a wrong route or needs to seek assistance, the functionality and mobility of driving decreases. Wayfinding can thus be considered a crucial component of successful and satisfactory driving experiences (Clark 2008, 15-16). The importance of hierarchical wayfinding (Passini 1981) to driving has been a key feature of signage design for the British motorway network, for example.

Despite such apparently dominant assumptions about the need for legibility, predictability, and imageability in the urban environment, it is important to emphasise that such an ordered and indeed more ‘rational’ approach is not the only way in which wayfinding has been considered. Indeed, developing parallel to Lynch (1960) was the Situationist International’s experiments with psychogeographic explorations of city environments, which through the concept of the dérive advocated calculated attempts to disrupt the psychologies of routinized patterns of urban movement and encounter (Bonnett 1989, Pinder 2004). The disparity between more and less instrumental and rational modes of movement highlights that meanings of mobility are not fixed, but rather take shape within broader political-economic contexts (Cresswell, 2006; Spinney 2016).

# Features of the Legible London scheme

The chapter now turns to examine how the Legible London scheme seeks to achieve its key objectives. From the 2007 pilot project onwards, AIG and TfL agreed that the most appropriate method of providing information and thus increase walking in London would be to design a “master” structure around which all system elements would attach. Known as the Living Map, a master structure allows all online maps, printed maps, on-street systems, and at-exit tube maps to present information from a single source for consistency. These elements combine to provide a comprehensive pan-London wayfinding system for pedestrians.

The on-street elements of the Legible London scheme—lith information boards, wall signs as well as finger posts—are in part determined by the physical restrictions of London’s built form, with physical space constraints a key consideration. On-street maps must be a certain size and scale to be useful; but at the same time narrow pavements and organic street patterns can constrain the placement of signage. Map keys, text font size and overall clarity must allow use by all: the scheme must meet Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) requirements, for example.[[3]](#endnote-3)

In making decisions about what types of information were to be provided on system elements, AIG initially determined four main questions must be answered:

1. Where am I?
2. Where is it?
3. How do I get there?
4. What else is around here?

Information present on the system elements (maps, text, images, key etc.) is a direct answer to each of these four questions.

AIG worked with experts in architecture, graphics, built environment and urban design to develop the first prototypes; and user feedback played an important role in system development. Within individual maps, naming conventions and classifications built upon existing districts and villages of London, in part because village names have been long used by bus companies to identify the start and end points of routes. Further, area naming in itself was seen as important:

Legible London can influence the behaviour of Londoners and visitors, simply by creating awareness that London has a number of named areas and that all you need to find a place is to know what area it is in” (AIG 2008, 16).

On-street map display is via what is known as ‘heads-up mapping’, as this was believed to be most easily understood and absorbed by pedestrians and thereby promote “intuitive understanding” (AIG 2007, 48). Heads-up mapping removes the mental transformation (or map turning) needed for orientation that is usually encountered when using traditional north-based (compass) mapping when the user is not actually facing north. Interestingly, it was decided that Legible London maps in tube stations would use north-based maps because such locations have no direct physical connection with the street environment.

AIG believed that Legible London needed to provide consistency and familiarity of information and design, otherwise it would risk repeating mistakes made by (earlier) disparate individual London borough council and Business Improvement District systems which lacked information cohesiveness and consistency. A range of key features were built in to achieve such consistency: progressive disclosure, reliability and predictability; avoiding ‘navigational waste’, visibility and legibility.

## Progressive disclosure

Progressive disclosure as a process involves supplying just enough information at each decision point to navigate successfully, without overburdening the user. AIG (2006) investigated existing wayfinding best practice examples from a range of global locations and cited the modern British road and motorway signage system, which uses progressive disclosure of information, as an ideal basis for providing pedestrian information at the right time and place as required. AIG believed that the level of clarity achieved by the UK road sign system was sorely missing from pedestrian wayfinding systems, illustrated by the 32 different pedestrian wayfinding systems in place across Central London in the early millennium (AIG 2006; Clark 2008, 17).

## Reliability and predictability

Initial reports stressed the need for reliability and predictability in the Legible London scheme:

Availability of information is crucial to wayfinding decision making…At a certain point along a route, no information (or only contradictory information) may be available. In this situation you have no other options than to resort to trial and error, making decisions by chance, or perhaps, on instinct.” (Arthur and Passini 1992, cited in AIG 2008, 19).

One of the strengths of walking as a mode is that, once a route is known, it rarely varies in length of journey. However, in contrast to other modes, where an unknown journey can be investigated through timetables (AIG 2006) unknown walking journeys are seen as unreliable in that a timetable is not present. This situation was seen to arise directly from a lack of sufficient pedestrian information to give accurate indications of time to walk. Linked to this, such trips are not reliable in terms of support once walking on-street. Thus AIG concluded that journey time reliability and associated information would encourage more walking trips (Clark 2008, 18).

## Navigational waste

The avoidance of ‘navigational waste’ (Burns 1998) also was seen to be important in the development of the Legible London scheme. This refers to the excess journey time above an optimal route which is lost to wayfinding errors and incorrect decision making. Avoiding navigational waste was deemed particularly important if the scheme was to be successful in encouraging both tourists and commuters to move more quickly and efficiently through urban space. AIG (2008) suggested that time spent navigating, using landmarks to wayfind and rechecking progress, was time lost to observation, thought or other activities, with the consequence that the ‘place’ is not used, but simply passed through (Clark 2008, 17).

## Visibility

A key point of tension in any pedestrian wayfinding scheme is the balance between being able to see signs and wayfinding information, whilst at the same time being able to distinguish elements of the surrounding environment. Indeed one of AIG’s criticisms of existing London signage was that chaotic ‘street clutter’ (e.g. vehicle signs, traffic signals, lamp columns, guardrails and shop awnings) made it difficult for pedestrians to find their way. AIG stressed that

Information, in particular graphic information, has to be designed for normal environmental perception, which consists of the scanning and glancing process. People tend to ignore information displays that are not designed appropriately, or to walk away from such displays after spending a minimum of time in futile search (2008, 28).

Thus new pedestrian wayfinding systems must be distinctive, consistent, offer appropriate and useable information without becoming lost in the general streetscape (Clarke 2008, 18-19).

## Legibility

The design of individual elements within the Legible London scheme (see also Figure 3.1) has sought to combine elements of colour, clarity and boldness in order to achieve strong legibility. At the top of the wayfinder, a yellow strip acts as a beacon to help pedestrians find the sign, while an address below locates the individual sign and the area in which it placed. In the middle of the wayfinder, directional information is provided to give quick confirmation of nearby attractions or points of interest. In the bottom half, two maps and a street index fill any further information gaps for the reader. Using time as a measure of travel distance, a 15 minute scale planner map provides more general orientation, whilst the 5 minute scale finder map helps the user identify detailed local landmarks. A detailed street index enables pedestrians to identify specific roads and to find their final destination.

The five minute distance finder map (see Figure 3.2) explicitly registers the importance of pedestrians’ mental maps to the design of the Legible London system. AIG (2008) argued that a pedestrian wayfinding system which used human, as opposed to motor traffic, scales of distance, memory and recognition would engage more effectively with pedestrians and thus be more likely to be used. It was felt that locations within a five minute walk distance were liable to seem more easily walkable and thus encourage walking. Time rather than distance was used as a measure following an AIG (2006) survey that 73% of respondents could not accurately estimate actual distance and fewer than 60% could correctly identify the direction to another tube station (AIG 2006, cited, in Clark 2008, 41).

<FIGURE 3.2 HERE>

Although the depiction of journey time rather than distance has a ‘user-friendly’ intent, it is important to indicate that a generic measure of travel time makes particular assumptions about the types of bodies walking in the city. It is assumed that pedestrians have uniform physical capabilities and comportment; and are not accompanied by young children, for example. In some written documentation (e.g. AIG 2007, 30) a 400m distance equivalent is given for the ‘five minute walk’. But on the ground, the scale of the five minute finder map can be seen to give precedence to design simplicity over specified inclusivity.

In other ways, however, the Legible London scheme does seek to be cognisant of bodily differences among users as well as among individuals’ mental maps. It was emphasised that “a pedestrian wayfinding system should cater for all individuals, whatever their preference for information provision and this will in part be determined by their mental map experiences” (Clark 2008, 11). Individuals acquire and use different sensory clues in the urban environment, which has important implications for the type of wayfinding support that might be provided. Further, as portrayed in Figure 3.3, the design of Legible London signs involved a calculation of Department of Transport standards for x-heights (a unit of measurement used to define the point at which text and images in a sign become legible to the viewer) across a range of visual acuities and visual fields.

<FIGURE 3.3 HERE>

A study by Department for Transport (DfT) and Walk England (2008) highlighted a number of ordering principles that all walking maps (and by extension, wayfinding systems) should communicate to their intended users; and the Legible London maps draw upon these. The provision of consistency and continuity across borders and boundaries is one element, along with supported encouragement for exploration when needed. Maps should also be able to promote local identity (Clark 2008, 21-22). Figure 3.2 above reveals how a Legible London map registers a local area, in this case the South Bank ‘village’; and includes landmarks such as the National Theatre, the Hayward Gallery and Coin Street Neighbourhood Centre. Transport nodes such as Waterloo Station as well as bus stops also are prominent. Critical cartography has increasingly drawn attention to the importance of whom or what is on the map and the way such features shape how we know and understand environments (Harley 1989; Dodge et al 2011). In the Legible London scheme landmarks are chosen according to a specific set of criteria, or “system rules” ranging from memorable, identifiable and internationally recognizable sites, to listed buildings of architectural merit and key ‘live assets’, such as civic buildings, open spaces, places of worship and monuments. Live assets can also include commercial buildings, such as ‘landmark retail’ outlets, cinemas and theatres, although unlike marketed systems such as Google maps, organisations cannot pay for recognition.

# Implications and conclusions

This chapter has drawn upon the example of the Legible London pedestrian wayfinding scheme in order to explore how decisions made by designers can shape how and where people move around the city. By encouraging pedestrians to walk rather than to take public transport, the scheme explicitly has sought to change their mental maps in finding their way through the city. Further, we have seen that wayfinding has been conceptualised as something which is more efficient if it is conducted in an orderly and controlled manner: individual elements of the Legible London scheme seek to provide a unified and coherent design system for pedestrian mobility.

The overall intent of the scheme both drives and brings into conflict different meanings of mobility. At one level, Legible London seeks to enhance urban productivity by enabling labouring commuters to move efficiently through the city. At the same time, the scheme also aims to facilitate more leisurely tourist movement through the city, even though this is a rationalised form of movement. It could be argued that if these two different goals did not need to be reconciled, the version of tourist walking that Legible London promotes might have been influenced instead by a situationist dérive, offering some form of ‘lucky dip’ for those inclined to explore.[[4]](#endnote-4) In broad terms we might further emphasise that the practice of walking itself can provide opportunities for alternative tactics, even as the physical fabric of the street (including Legible London signage) is ordered and stable (Urry 2007, 73; drawing upon de Certeau 1984).

Finally, the scheme is fascinating in the sense that the components, design objectives and underlying principles of Legible London have themselves become mobile: similar schemes have been implemented in UK regional cities such as Southampton and Bristol as well as internationally—for example in Beijing, New York and Sydney, Australia. In part, such design mobility has occurred because the originating ‘legible city’ consultancy (now called Applied Wayfinding) has been commissioned to undertake further work, ranging from an indoor scheme for the National Gallery in London to a redesign of wayfinding systems across Hudson Yards, a retail and public space in Manhattan, New York City. But also, as the founder and chief designer at Applied Wayfinding has noted:

Legible London-inspired solutions have popped up in Sweden, China, Australia, the U.S., Canada, and Russia, as well as across the UK. They all have similar beacon-style units featuring to-scale maps and heads-up orientation (of course), with integrated directional information. It has become a global standard. A great British export. (Fendley 2015).

In the emergence of what Fendley (2015) believes to be a ‘global standard”, we can see the ways in which ideas about design travel through different spaces and places. Such mobilities have important effects, shaping how cities are read, understood and moved through. Equally, however, they are likely to be developed, transformed and indeed subject to counter processes of resistance. The recent reawakening of interest in psychogeographic investigations of cities in part has emerged from concern over singular and corporatized representations of urban space, the predictability of urban planning methods and the controlling impulses they embody (Bennett 2011, Garrett 2014). How these counter tendencies mobilise new media and spatial technologies to define and redefine pedestrian experiences will be an important feature of city living in the twenty-first century.

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1. When the Legible London scheme was planned, designed and launched, the consultancy was known as AIG, although more recently its name has changed to Applied Wayfinding: see [www.appliedwayfinding.com](http://www.appliedwayfinding.com) (accessed 13/06/16). For clarity this chapter uses the original consultancy name (AIG), under which reports and plans for Legible London were first published. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. There are strong parallels with Spinney’s (2016) analysis of the role of the cyclist. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For a discussion of the limitations of ‘universal design’, see Kullman, Chapter 8, this volume. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. A number of mobile phone apps are now available which seek to help users develop their own dérive, although of course there is a certain irony in a reliance upon location fixing technologies whilst also seeking to ‘get lost’. On the critical potential for unsettling and un-fixing location amidst the positioning technologies of GPS, see Pinder (2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)