

Getting from Here to There

Don't have a good sense of direction?

It's a learnable skill, says Janet Reizenstein Carpman '73.

Interview by Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

I first began thinking about spatial orientation and disorientation when I was studying for my master's degree in city planning at Harvard. I was intrigued with the idea that human behavior could be affected by designed environments, and vice versa. During my second grad school adventure, in the PhD program in architecture and sociology at the University of Michigan, I directed an applied research project on wayfinding.

We studied the design-related needs of patients and visitors in preparation for the design of a \$285 million hospital at the University of Michigan Medical Center.

In the process of interviewing thousands of patients and visitors, we learned that disorientation was a major source of stress. Perhaps this shouldn't have been surprising in an old hospital where the emergency room was located on an upper floor and colored floor lines snaked throughout, but our team was still struck by the significance of this issue. When my partner, Myron Grant, and I founded our consulting firm, we decided to focus on wayfinding.

Janet Reizenstein Carpman '73

Architectural sociologist; partner, Carpman Grant Associates, Wayfinding Consultants; and coauthor of *Directional Sense: How to Find Your Way Around* (Institute for Human Centered Design)

Hometown: Ann Arbor, Mich.

On navigating the River Campus:

"I have vivid memories of being lost in the Rush Rhees stacks, wandering the extensive, mural-covered tunnels connecting campus buildings, and trudging through the snow on crutches—definitely an incentive to find the shortest route between two points!"



Planners and architects can do many things to make places navigable. They should make entrances obvious; keep circulation simple; maintain unobstructed views to entrances and decision points; design areas to look appropriate for their function; and in larger facilities, create some spaces that look distinct or unique.

Inspired by friends who admit not being able to find their way out of a paper bag, we delved into the world of the "directionally challenged." We explored the sparse research on a "sense of direction." We found that wayfinding is a learnable skill, not a mysterious instinct you're doomed to live without. *Directional Sense* is designed to help people develop that skill.

There are several basic skills to wayfinding. One is understanding wayfinding words and numbers, because there's a lot of language that's used on signs and maps and in directions that may not have an obvious meaning. When somebody says, "Oh, it's just down the road a piece"—what does that mean? There are also single roads whose name changes three or four times, addresses that follow a pattern of even numbers on one side and odd on the other, and then the pattern changes. There are shortcomings with every directional cue.

You need to have what we call a "big picture" of where you are in relation to your destination. That involves understanding spatial layouts. But, of course, layouts can be confusing in many ways too. Part of helping people understand how to navigate is to get the message across that no cue is perfect, no map is perfect, as no human being is perfect. We have to use the best information we have, and use a number of different kinds of cues in order to help us get from one place to the other.

GPS is another important tool we have to navigate. But it doesn't always work. It's not always correct. Using GPS involves using all of the basic wayfinding skills in one way or another. 