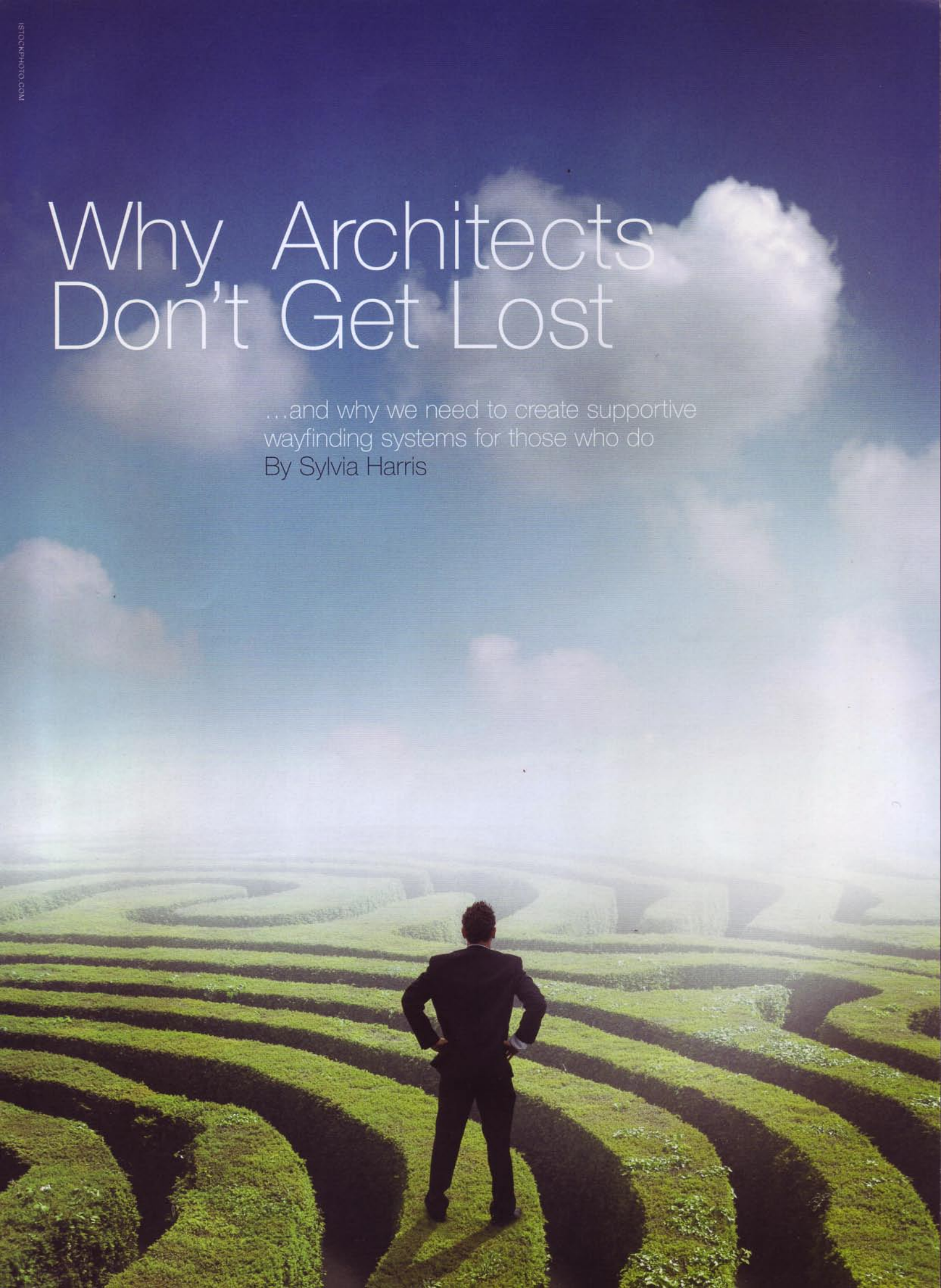


Why Architects Don't Get Lost

...and why we need to create supportive
wayfinding systems for those who do
By Sylvia Harris





On road trips with architects, I am always intrigued by their remarkable internal compasses. When entering cities, driving along country roads, or wandering about shopping centers, architects rarely, if ever, get hopelessly lost. As a group they have an amazing natural sense of orientation and direction.

I am an information designer. Even though I create wayfinding systems to help people navigate through large hospitals, airports, and other public venues, my sense of direction is unreliable and I get lost at the drop of a hat. My architect friends make fun of this handicap, but I have come to see it as an advantage. It helps me understand the behavior of ordinary people as they make their way through increasingly complex environments. And it gives me more compassion.

In architectural team meetings, I've heard my colleagues laugh at the stories I tell of people getting disoriented. But it might be helpful and illuminating for building professionals to shift perspectives and see navigation through the eyes of ordinary people, many of whom can't read a map, find north, or remember landmarks.

Why people get lost

The art and science of navigation has come of age in the last 30 years. Kevin Lynch is credited with coining the phrase "wayfinding" and introducing the concept to future generations of architects in his seminal book, *Image of the City* (MIT Press, 1960), the result of a five-year study of Los Angeles, Boston, and Jersey City. Lynch concluded that every traveler within a city or town forms a unique mental image that he uses to navigate and orient himself. The best public places are logical and ordered and provide a wide variety of navigational cues that allow people to build their own personalized mental maps. Signs are not enough to aid navigation, Lynch discovered. Maps, compasses, people, and even smells are all needed to help people create their own unique navigation strategies. It is not uncommon to observe visitors to New York City walking around with MapQuest directions and a visitor's guide while still asking people on the street for directions.

The cognitive psychologist Doreen Kimura believes there are multiple ways to assemble and understand mental images of physical spaces. In her controversial book *Sex and Cognition* (MIT Press, 1999), she reports on studies showing that sex hormones affect brain organization at a very early age, eventually leading to significant differences in the ways men and women solve spatial problems. After years of conducting spatial tests on gender groups, Kimura concluded that women tend to be good at remembering objects in an array and can easily remember landmarks along a route. Men, on the other hand, tend to have internal compasses that enable them to rotate spatial arrays in their heads, and therefore they rarely "feel" lost. Understanding these differences explains a lot. People dependent on landmarks flounder and feel lost in a new setting where they have not learned the landmark patterns, or in settings where the landscape is nondescript. People with strong internal compasses need only a good map and the location of true north to find their way. In my practice, I've also met people who can't process spatial information of any kind and are much better off with verbal support.

The architectural profession includes both male and female practitioners, but I wonder if the field attracts individuals of both genders who have finely calibrated, multidimensional plotting instincts. Architects typically have superior spatial skills and the ability to rotate objects and plans in their heads. But if they assume the general public perceives the world as they do, architects may not realize how easily confused people can become in any new environment. The challenge for architects and wayfinding designers is to develop supportive wayfinding environments complete with a wide assortment of communication tools that augment their users' individual cognitive approach to navigation.

The way to go

Creating supportive environments for all people starts by embracing redundancy. A supportive space presents the user with a wide variety of navigation tools – something for everyone. The most navigable environments have at least these three tools: maps for those with good targeting skills, landmarks for those with strong memorization skills, and personal support for those who prefer verbal instructions.

One way to make sure the wayfinding systems provide enough redundancy and are understood by people of varying abilities is to work with professional information designers and conduct periodic usability tests. Information designers are creative experts who conceptualize and create communications programs and services. Usability consultants work with information designers to evaluate people in the process of using objects, places, and services. These professionals are the secret ingredient in most successful wayfinding programs because they ensure that a site has the right array of navigational tools for its typical population.

On a recent visit to a local business improvement district, I experienced firsthand the benefits of integrated wayfinding communications. The neighborhood had a distinctive graphic style and brand, which helped me define the boundaries of the district. I used a few key art installations as landmarks. Maps were located at critical decision points, and finger direction signs pointed to popular destinations. Every few blocks I could find maintenance staff in clearly marked uniforms who knew it was their job to help anyone who looked lost. The web of streets in that district was bewildering, but I felt supported. This is how integrated wayfinding works.

Do these findings about wayfinding systems mean that architects should allow themselves to get lost? No, but they do suggest that perhaps the best way to serve people is to develop an empathetic attitude toward wayfinding, and to hand over the wayfinding reins to usability experts and communications specialists on complex public-space projects. This is important not only for the everyday users of the built environment, but also for all design professionals who have to find our way.

Sylvia Harris is an expert in communications and information design. For the last 25 years she has provided visitor communications master-planning services to the country's leading public institutions.