

The Missing Signage Gene

By Frank J. Convery, Chair, Comhar Sustainable Development Council

For anyone who has spent time in the US or Germany, one of the most striking contrasts with home is the quality of signage, defined here to mean any indicator that directs a visitor or tells them they have arrived at a destination.

In Germany and the US, every street has its sign, usually at eye level and big enough to be seen at 30 metres. Every house has its number proudly displayed, so that it can be easily read from the street. Motorways give you many and ample warnings about forthcoming changes and exits in large and consistent signage, so that lane changes can be made with ease in plenty of time. When you go to conferences or attend events, the name-tags are readable at eye-level at three metres' distance, and likewise for signs in museums and art galleries.

But Ireland is a different country.

Finding a house address usually means counting down (or up) – and wondering, as you do so, are the numbers sequential or alternates – using as the navigational anchor the one resident who has bothered to provide a clear number for his or her house, readable from the street.

Tourists crane their necks peering at often dirty or non-existent signs, designed to be read by short-sighted adult giraffes, as they try to find their way around confused and confusing streets. Motorists stop in the middle of junctions as they assess the quality of the road pavement as a guide to which way to turn. Thinking we are heading for Cork off the M50, we instead find ourselves in Ballymount and waste an hour or more recovering our direction and our composure. At conferences, museums and art galleries, a combination of undignified kneeling and peering is necessary to know with whom you are talking and at what you are looking.

What are the consequences? We perforce become stressed out orienteers, seeking to recognise a landmark, pub, a tree or any feature that will guide us. We have more accidents, as we slow down or stop in the middle of the road to assess options, suddenly changing lanes to find our way, walking into streets to see if we can find a sign to read. We waste fuel, and increase greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution, as we gratuitously travel more to find our destination. Mail gets mis-delivered. We annoy our 420,000 non-Irish residents and our tourists, as they spend precious walking and driving time chasing ephemeral navigational aids, and we diminish their and our enjoyment of our galleries and museums.

In the end, lack of good signage is about thoughtlessness and bad manners. We are saying to strangers – and we are all strangers from time to time and from place to place – ‘Your comfort, safety and convenience are not our concern. We – the locals – know where we’re going and how to find it; you’ll just have to depend on a combination of good luck, our good nature and osmosis to find your way’.

There is some progress. Animated by Brendan O’Hara, formerly a member of the board, the National Roads Authority (NRA) is implementing a policy of high-quality signage on national primary roads. The Ordnance Survey of Ireland (OSI) is almost complete with its digitisation of Ireland, and Northern Ireland is likewise ‘covered’, so it will be possible to use Global Positioning System (GPS) technologies to help us navigate. But progress is partial and very slow.

Why are we so bad in Ireland?

The US superiority in signage is sometimes attributed to the preponderance of German immigrants at a crucial stage in US development, positing that the Germans imported their passion for clear directions, which are so characteristic of their home country. More saliently, it is a country of immigrants, where everyone is – in a sense – a stranger who needs help.

In the 19th century, the Celts were regarded as charming, imaginative, feckless and disorganised, lacking the inherent capacities that provide industry and organisation, missing the signage gene. The evidence for such ethnically-based conclusions has not stood the test of time, so there must be other explanations, including: the fact that Irish society was so local for so long – untrammelled by visitors – that we didn't need clear signs because we were all locals; we have more road per capita than most other societies, and the cost and hassle of signing them properly is too much; we are unusually prone to vandalism – another erroneous ethnic conclusion? – and whatever we do will be destroyed, so let's not start; responsibility for directions is so decentralised and localised that responsibility, in belonging to everyone, belongs to no-one; we may be doing an implicit cost-benefit analysis, concluding that providing high-quality signage – and it does cost – is not worth the benefits of reduced stress, fewer accidents, saved time, happier visitors and reduced environmental impact.

My suggestion: a directive from Cabinet that every state and local agency gets its signage act together – including making professional signage a requirement of all planning permissions and NDP-supported infrastructure investments, or budgets will be cut. And put an American woman in charge of delivery.