Case Study

Interconnect Birmingham

Interconnect Birmingham. Credit: City ID & JAP Alexander
Interconnect Birmingham is a framework within which infrastructure and design for Birmingham’s city centre streetscape is being evolved and improved, with a focus on people, their journey, interaction and activity.

Within this framework, this project focused on the planning, design and delivery of the Interconnect wayfinding system, with the aim of improving visitors’ experience of Birmingham.

Visitor surveys and enquiries to Visitor Centre staff identified a need to improve wayfinding and signage in Birmingham. Marketing Birmingham’s first audit in 2007 demonstrated 47 different signage systems through the city centre and generally the quality was poor. The systems were disjointed, with too many providers seeking different aims from their signage.

Partners and stakeholders including Birmingham City Council, British Waterways (now the Canal and River Trust), Centro and the city’s Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), were keen to work with Marketing Birmingham to find a solution. Following an open tender process, Marketing Birmingham appointed City ID to support the development of a new wayfinding system for the city.

The final system design integrated pedestrian wayfinding with public transport information to move Birmingham from a city in which the provider/transport mode was the top rational, to a situation where the individual’s journey was the priority. This acknowledged the central importance of the user and that each individual, across a single journey, may walk, cycle or ride on a bus, tram or train and therefore their options for travel at each decision-making point must be catered for, without obliging them to reinterpret information a number of times.

Information is provided through a network of on-street, heads-up, map based totems, integrated with public transport at bus stops and pedestrian wayfinding decision-making points.

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**Approach**

To bring a new wayfinding system to the street the project comprised the following stages:

- Research and audits to establish the current state of wayfinding provision
- Business case for improvements used for advocacy and project support
- Proposed approach
- Pedestrian flow analysis
- Route hierarchy and location of information
- Map and content development through workshops and open studio sessions
- Content hierarchy decisions - what should appear and at what level of detail
- Product design and development - form of the product to communicate the information with clarity
- Testing with the public
- Manufacture prototype
- Full production
- Installation
- Follow-up research and evaluation

Over the past 7 years various funding sources have been used to achieve the installation of the Interconnect wayfinding system on street. The initial works were funded by the Regional Development Agency, ‘Advantage West Midlands’, through a successful bid from Marketing Birmingham into the visitor economy funding stream. This created the overview and strategy for the city.

The concept was supported and developed by Birmingham City Council, which was working on the Big City Plan, a master plan for the next 20 years of development for the city. ‘A Vision for a Walkable City’ was the result of their input, focusing specifically on planning the pedestrian realm.

This gave a strong shape to the delivery of on-street totems, which were backed by Marketing Birmingham, Centro, Colmore Business District and Retail Birmingham, who all invested in the foundation stage to fund the development of content and mapping.

The opportunity to seek investment from the ERDF ‘Investing in the City Region’ project arose with the co-funding of works by Centro. Centro, the regional Integrated Transport Authority (ITA) had begun to analyse its bus and metro network and develop a project in the city centre to change bus stop locations to meet the needs of the metro line extension through the city centre (Birmingham City Centre Interchange ‘BCCI’) and improve bus stop and service quality (Statutory Quality Partnership ‘SQP’).

It became clear that by developing the on-street wayfinding and information to join-up these pedestrian and public transport journeys, there was a more simple solution for bus passengers and an opportunity to reveal public transport information to pedestrians at appropriate times, to allow decisions to be made on mode and means of travel. This would not have been possible without the Centro-ERDF co-funding. The BIDs have also continued to fund totems in their area, where necessary.
Results

The baseline position from the Marketing Birmingham 2010 visitor survey was that 23% of visitors were dissatisfied with mapping and signage in Birmingham. The aim was to improve this situation, as it was also an on-going source of complaints and enquiries to the Visitor Information Centre staff.

The Key Performance Indicator (KPI) was to reduce dissatisfaction by 10% to just 13% as a result of the initial Interconnect-BCCI work on signage and mapping.

Marketing Birmingham hoped that once the system had bedded into the city and stakeholders were using the map base to direct people to their destination, the satisfaction results would increase.

The 2013 visitor survey showed that just 8% of respondents were dissatisfied, achieving the project aim (Marketing Birmingham Visitor Survey, 2013).

The Birmingham partners, with City ID, led the way in integrating public transport and pedestrian wayfinding information. It took time to create a partnership involving big organisations like Birmingham City Council and Centro and with the political power of the private sector-led BIDs. These all coalesced around a very high quality solution to the wayfinding which was an issue affecting all of the partners.

The Interconnect project also provided a platform on which the BIDs and the city could work together. There had always been collaboration, but this was the first time that a major project had been developed together. The BIDs, particularly Colmore Business District and Retail Birmingham, were vital to the project achieving early support throughout several organisations, because of their powerful business voice.

The other newer BIDs could then join the project following the path already paved for joint-working by the original partners.

Having developed the on-street mapping and totems with the Centro-ERDF funding, the partners all felt ownership of the project and invested their own funds to produce associated print and digital mapping to suit the needs of their destination/area. This was for promotional campaigns, visitor information, events and festivals, magazine inserts or simply wayfinding.

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<th>2010 visitor survey (before)</th>
<th>23% of people dissatisfied with mapping and signage in Birmingham</th>
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Key Performance Indicator (KPI) target as a result of the initial Interconnect-BCCI work on signage and mapping (10% reduction)
Challenges and Lessons Learnt

• The focus on a high quality product and information has made the Interconnect map base sought after by partners and is generating further interest from stakeholders, from developers to retail investors, throughout the city. It has definitely been the right approach for Birmingham

• Designing a system in which the colours, font and icons speak of Birmingham, rather than a generic solution from a brochure, has made its journey through the planning and conservations teams remarkably smooth. This also reflects the desire to experience a sense of place in the destinations we visit, rather than carbon copy streets, shops and spaces

• The product design process needed to take more account of the views of the assets and maintenance team. There remains an issue with the removal of glass from the totems, which takes a 2-people team

• Internal communications can be as political and in need of on-going attention as those with stakeholders and partners

• On-going maintenance must be sorted out prior to the main delivery of the project, but sometimes there needs to be a proof of concept stage before everyone feels confident to sign up to it. For some places, this may be a high quality print map, for others, a pilot area

• Such has been the interest in the system that Marketing Birmingham are now talking to a range of stakeholders who want to invest in the system, a great boost for future development as the project moves out of the city centre

Top Tips

1. Let the needs of the user - visitor or resident - guide the function and the form of the information. By putting them at the centre, many hurdles regarding priority of information, partner involvement, signage and totem design and logo disagreements can be resolved

2. Ensure that there is a strong design ethic woven throughout the project. It would be difficult for the user to put their finger on why it looks good and works well, but this is a big contributory factor

3. Expect opposition if you are implementing change to the streetscape; but have a strong evidence base and strategy and just one or two committed partner champions for the project - you will win the doubters round. Be patient - the right time will come for the project

For more information

Visit: www.marketingbirmingham.com

Birmingham tourist information map.
Credit: City ID & JAP Alexander