MEMORANDUM

TO: Kathleen Socolofsky, Director of Arboretum
FROM: Julia Holton
DATE: April 24, 2024
SUBJECT: Report on the Visual Rhetoric of Arboretum

I visited the UC Davis Arboretum during the ongoing Putah Creek renovation to analyze the effectiveness of the visual, aural, linguistic, and spatial rhetoric of this public natural space. From visiting the space, I observed a strong use of aural communication, event signage, and seating layout design. Based on my observations, I will recommend ways for the audience to engage with and learn more about nature and to make the space more easily navigable.

Introduction

I visited the Arboretum with the intention of determining how effective the visual rhetoric of the space was based on the Arboretum's goals for how they want people to experience the space. The Arboretum website suggests they want people to engage with plants through education about plants and hosting hands-on opportunities to connect with plants and the Davis community. They overall want people to have a relaxing peaceful time in the natural environment provided by the Arboretum. I analyze whether these goals were accomplished by the following guiding questions I prepared before visiting the site:

- Is the space easy to navigate?
    - Is the experience different when entering from different locations?
    - Are there maps clearly communicating the various sections and amenities of the space?
- What are the modes of communication that encourage mindful attention and connect people with each other and nature?
- Is there signage to educate people on the plants and events the Arboretum offers?
    - Do they support or take away from the immersion into nature?
    - Are they accessible to the Arboretum's audience of all ages?

From observing with these questions in mind, I saw a strong use of aural communication, engaging event signage, some directional signage, and immersive natural layouts of seating. The Arboretum didn't fully achieve its educational and community goals as they lacked sufficient layout signage, effective interactive educational signage, and engaging plant identification signage.

Layout

Maps

The Arboretum has many ways to enter it, which leads to a different experience for each person. In "Sign Posting Info Design", Passini's principle of wayfinding is defined as the mental representation of a space in a process (Passini 2000). This concept of wayfinding applies to the Arboretum because as people come from different areas, they need to orient themselves in relation to everything else in the Arboretum. Without wayfinding signage to help, I couldn't figure out a mental map of the Arboretum to find my way. There are no people in the Arboretum guiding the experience; people roam freely since there are no formal entrances and exits.

As seen in Figure 1, the Arboretum provides a helpful sign with a visual map of where the Arboretum renovation will take place, and which areas are therefore off limit; the map doesn't point to any other aspects of the Arboretum.

Figure 1, Map of Arboretum Construction

Figure 2, Directional Signage

In the layout of the Arboretum, there are different designed sections, including the California Natives, Redwood Grove, etc. There is little signage communicating this clearly so it's easy to miss places or not know they exist. As seen in Figure 2, there were a few signs with linguistic and visual communication that told people with arrows and words where to head to see sections. The main sign for the 'California Foothill Collection' confused me as I wasn't sure if that was where I was or what I was about to approach. The images alongside it didn't help with recognition.

The construction has made them implement detour signage and maps. These are meant to help people navigate the space, but the directional signage such as Figure 3 was confusing, as there were two arrows pointing in both directions. There were so many of these directional signs that it stressed me out as I walked, even though the pathway was largely the same, so they seemed irrelevant. The confusing signage detracted from the calming immersion in nature the Arboretum hopes to provide.

Figure 3, Detour Signage

Seating Layout

The seating layout of the Arboretum is well planned with shaded seating opportunities throughout. As seen in Figure 2, there are benches right off the path surrounded by nature, giving people rest stops from walking while still being immersed in nature. The ample number of benches communicates the Arboretum's desire for people to stop and take time in nature, to stay for a while and be surrounded by calming nature.

Figure 4, Bench off Pathway

As I walked deeper into the Arboretum, I grew thirsty and needed to use the restroom, which made the rest of the walk uncomfortable. I wasn't as inclined to read signs or enjoy nature. The lack of amenities takes away from the calming feeling and meaningful engagement with nature. If I wasn't already familiar with the Arboretum, I wouldn't have known where the nearest bathroom or water fountain was as there are no signs directing visitors to them.

Aural

The Arboretum is full of sounds of birds chirping and leaves rustling, but since my visit was during construction, I heard loud, disturbing construction noises. This took me out of the calm immersion into nature that the Arboretum strives to provide. I went another time, and the noises weren't there, so it wasn't too concerning that it is a constant, and unfortunate necessary disturbance.

Figure 5, Sign of Folk Music Jam Session

The Arboretum offers more than just nature sounds, music plays a role in aurally communicating the goal of community with people in nature. Someone was playing piano on Wyatt Deck, which made me feel connected to the person, the quaintness of Davis, and a deeper joy and connectedness with the nature I was walking through. Another music opportunity is advertised in Figure 5, signage about a folk music session on the Wyatt Deck where all levels are welcome. This opportunity for anyone to play and hear music with each other supports the Arboretum's goal of building community in Davis. The music along with the nature sounds of birds, enriches the peaceful experience and fosters a more meaningful connection with nature, another one of the Arboretum's goals.

Event Signage

There was some successful event signage throughout the Arboretum. This signage in Figure 5 was successful, as the large text is easy to read and the visual image of a musical instrument pulls people in.

There are more events than just the music jam including plant sales, which have successful visual and linguistic communication. In Figure 6, the large, colorful text reading "plant sales" is enticing, and the picture of people and plants draws the eyes focus. It gives the audience an expectation of what type of plants there are. The information is easy to find, and there are numerous signs throughout the whole Arboretum, so the repetition helps reinforce the event. They are small, so they don't obstruct the

Figure 6, Plant Sale Signage

immersion into nature, but their bright color helps them stand out.

Figure 7, Putah Creek Town Hall Signage

Other events, like town hall meetings about Putah Creek, also had signage, as seen in Figure 7. However, the sign was unclear about the action it wanted you to take until you read it all. The title was vague and not intriguing or informative enough for someone to want to read a paragraph of text. This text heavy confusing sign wasn't effective at communicating its message.

Educational Signage

Plant Identification Signage

The signage identifying the plants relies on linguistic communication alone. In "How Does Rhetoric Work in Multimodal Projects?" Ball promotes the use of multimodal strategies as being more engaging. This makes people want to look for longer (Ball, 2022). Due to this lack of multimodal communication, as seen in Figure 8, I rarely read these signs, and I struggled to remember the names once I looked away. The typeface is legible and direct, but it lacks interest due to just being words. Figure 9 shows how some signage's placement distracted from the beauty of the nature. This takes the audience out of the calm immersion into nature. These signs weren't always clearly communicating what plant they were referring to, as demonstrated in Figure 10. There are many plants around the sign, so the audience loses out on the plant education.

The Arboretum is for the general public, people of all ages, but this boring, confusing signage only benefits people with prior plant knowledge and a strong commitment to learning plant names.

Figure 8, Plant Identification Signage

Figure 9, Tree Signage

Figure 10, Confusing Plant Signage

Educational Nature Signage

Figure 11, Educational Signage

These signs in Figure 11 and 12, while faded and cracked, are full of linguistic communication that I never care to read due its overwhelming number of words. In "Information Design in Informal Settings" Screven supports focusing the audience on less things to have an impactful long-lasting takeaway (Screven, 2000). Tyler's "Shaping Beliefs" notes the importance of educating people, influencing them to take action, and finding creative ways to engage people with the knowledge (Tyler 1990). These signs don't engage the audience into action in a creative way. They have

Figure 12, Educational Signage

you sit and read an overload of information, leaving the audience remembering nothing. The educational signage doesn't help achieve the Arboretum's goal of education, as they don't encourage retention of knowledge. They also aren't child accessible, as few kids would be willing to read and remember all that text.

Conclusion

While having its strengths, the Arboretum could improve in all the elements mentioned to better reach its goals of promoting plant knowledge, community, and a peaceful, pleasant experience navigating the Arboretum.

As for layout, the Arboretum could add map signage throughout the Arboretum, around each entrance, and mark "You are here" on map. The map should include amenities and the sections of the arboretum. They could add on the signs an arrow to Wyatt Deck, and a water and restrooms symbol.

The plant identification signage could add drawings of the plants to help visitors more easily distinguish which plant it's talking about and to be more visually engaging. It could also provide a QR code for more information on the plant.

For educational signage, the signs could use less words and focus on key takeaways. Information like how to grow plants could be on QR codes, as most people don't care to know that, so it makes it less likely that a person passing by would look at the cluttered sign. It could also include QR codes to local plant organizations, so people can engage more in the community and have hands-on experience with plants.

Signs could have engaging activities for the audience, such as prompts to write plant poetry or give a silly plant name then reveal its real name. These interactive activities would engage different ages and help people remember the plants better.

Signs with QR codes around the Arboretum could link to an audio tour that gives people insight into the plants in that area. Pairing the aural communication to the visuals around would help people remember better than reading. It could have different talks so people can get exactly the information they want, such as mythology of plants, history, etc.

Overall, the Arboretum is a lovely place to go and relax in nature and listen to calming sounds. However, the signage could improve to better educate people about how to navigate the space and learn more about plants and opportunities.

Works Cited

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