

INFORMATION, IDENTITY AND INDIVIDUALITY

A customisable, 'ready-to-go' urban realm wayfinding system named 'frank' is bringing established – and affordable – best practice to a wide range of towns and cities



Consistency: In line with current urban design policy, frank's goal is to bring consistency to the urban realm across wayfinding structures, street furniture, feature lighting and even street naming. frank is customisable aesthetically, in terms of adding bespoke products, and in terms of sizing/dimensions. The system is also future-proofed, and could accommodate interactive digital technologies if required



Accurate costings: frank is already designed and developed, allowing the provision of accurate up-front costs, based on the combination of products and their specification. This overcomes a major obstacle for many clients, who struggle to commit to large design budgets when the end product isn't yet defined (or designed)

Many smaller cities and towns lack strong visual identities and systems to knit together urban realm networks, to uncover local assets, and to highlight hidden gems. In the current economic climate, successful towns and cities must offer public realm quality, character and identity, backed with amenity, vision, leadership, skills and energy, all within squeezed budgets. Looking to the future becomes as much about maximising existing place assets as it is about attracting new development. Creating a recognisable character involves identifying ways in which a place can define and trade on its unique characteristics – and on the ways in which it communicates these assets to locals and visitors.

In the context of communicating place, there are demonstrable benefits to be gained from bespoke wayfinding systems. However, it is the strategy that is key – the tangible, physical structures can only be as effective as the communication and graphics allow. The evidence base that underpins informed decision-making about pedestrian movement and choice continues to grow, but 'no-brainers' are



The process of revealing the ‘hidden gems’ associated with every local area informs our approach to wayfinding. Deliver that, within a system like frank that brings affordable, best practice structures to any area without the need for big budgets and long lead times, and you have a winning formula

already leading public realm strategy across the UK: promoting walking and cycling, enabling accessibility to diverse town and city centre uses, showcasing local distinctiveness and the vernacular, supporting visitor management and marketing strategies, and enhancing the design quality and consistency of the urban realm.

Bringing established best practice to a wide range of towns and cities, in an affordable manner, is the driving force behind ‘frank’, a customisable, ‘ready-to-go’ urban realm system encompassing wayfinding structures, feature lighting, street names and urban furniture. ‘Rooted as it is in current good practice, frank removes a considerable portion of the design cost and so allows smaller organisations with restricted budgets to make a presence,’ says frank’s creative director Roger Crabtree of fwdesign, a design and wayfinding consultancy based in London. Working in collaboration, fwdesign and Woodhouse, specialist manufacturer of lighting and street furniture for Legible London, Canary Wharf and Kensington High Street, amongst other projects, have created frank.

One of the key principles behind the new system is to offer a best practice solution from two companies that are both experts in their fields, at a price that makes quality design and delivery truly accessible. Woodhouse’s input, which includes a



Innovative: As well as providing consistency across all potential urban realm needs, frank also introduces real innovation – from the ‘marker’ which helps define cycle routes and heritage trails, to the integration of solar powered illumination

crucial role in value engineering the designs into ready-to-go solutions at a known price, bestows additional credibility upon frank, based on its established reputation. ‘Together,’ says Woodhouse’s Romy Rawlings, ‘we have decades of experience in developing urban realm products. We are the ideal collaboration to bring an innovative solution like frank to market.’

TANGIBLE AND TRANSPARENT

Several large cities such as London and Bristol have invested heavily in legibility and developed ‘best practice’ ways to encourage pedestrians to explore and discover what they have to offer. Yet extensive investment – in terms of time as well as expense – is needed to deliver such bespoke solutions. ‘A bespoke wayfinding system comes at a price,’ says Crabtree. ‘For a typical large-scale retail development, the total cost –

including design, development, manufacture and installation costs – could range from £200,000 to £500,000. A large city centre system could be priced at twice as much – with delivery of a tangible product in the ground often remaining a worrying ‘unknown’ until some way into the design process. This is where frank, with its up-front transparency, offers a significant advantage.’

Time is also a key factor, adds Crabtree. ‘Designing a wayfinding system can take anything between six to 18 months, depending on place, the number of stakeholders and user groups and the planning and development processes. Frequently, says Crabtree, the design process for physical signage works the ‘wrong’ way around. ‘Historically, a product designer would design a family of sign structures, hand it to the graphic designer, and say “put some information on that”, and

then someone would have thought about how and where to place the structures in the context of the street. This is the reverse of what we do now. For us, strategy drives the information and the information then drives the physical entity.' That entity may not be a structure at all, he adds. 'It may be integrated with the environment, or be part of a landscape or part of a building.'

CIVIC CONSISTENCY

Even if budgets and lead times allow, wayfinding projects often miss opportunities to take a holistic approach to the environment; encompassing signage structures, street furniture and street names. Most cities and towns also have a wide array of maps from the many different agencies involved in civic governance, and there's precious little organisation or consistency. Through both consultancy and frank, Crabtree's aim is 'to offer wayfinding solutions across all touchpoints, and through all media, that are a consistent extension of the place brand.' The team behind frank will always put the emphasis on

Unique and customisable: No two versions of frank will look the same – from the steel frame to the choice of plinth, the graphic style, colour, materials and finishes are customised for each project. frank also brings new products into play, for example a routemarker



map-driven solutions, as opposed to predetermined directional systems. 'The map can be a very powerful device to give people reassurance about where they are, but can also encourage them to go and discover,' says Crabtree. 'Maps enforce the fact that you're on a journey. What's in front of you on the map is what you'll go and find.' There may be other tiers of information, for example transport links, that can be embedded into the pedestrian wayfinding experience. 'But this has to be managed carefully because you can overload the situation very quickly.'

With frank, says Crabtree, we can now begin to deliver wayfinding benefits for smaller towns and cities. 'Being "small" no longer stops you having a successful information system – this is one of the key driving forces behind frank,' he adds. 'Every place has presence, and value, yet frequently even people living in an area don't know what it has to offer. But there is always good local knowledge, and making use of local expertise is key to frank at every level.'

DEFINING THE END COST

Set within the current context of localism, using products like frank can be free up local resource for sound strategy development. Stakeholder consultation remains key. Successful pedestrian wayfinding systems need to be designed to deliver local content in an accessible, legible manner. 'We feel that frank's known costs allow smaller towns and cities to get the maximum from a limited budget by ring-fencing what they need for the implementation of tangible 'product' costs, and putting the biggest possible budget into strategy and information graphics,' says Rawlings. 'We are turning traditional signage projects on their head by defining the end cost (the physical product), and allowing as much as possible to be spent on upfront strategy and information design.'

In terms of design, frank's physical family has the flexibility, scalability and versatility to carry the information identified by a local strategy. The cost of developing the physical structures can be as much as one-third of the entire value of a wayfinding scheme. 'Because we're not having to engage with the design process of the physical product, there's no cost there and there's no lead time in that process,' says Crabtree. 'More resource can be put into contextualisation, graphic content, materials and finish.'

An information system should help to make people aware of



Photo render: solar frank in sample location

Sustainability: frank offers eco-friendly illuminated mapping at an affordable price via solar power, and has been designed with 100 per cent recyclability in mind

what is there, but should also be about surprise and discovery, says Crabtree. 'Outside the entrance to our office, we have a local area map for visitors, and on that map we put our favourite places: a hidden local garden, the best cake shop in London and a great little place to eat. This process of revealing the 'hidden gems' that are associated with every local area by those that know it well informs our approach to wayfinding. Deliver that, within a system like frank that brings affordable, best practice structures to any area without the need for big budgets and long lead times, and we think you have a winning formula.'

Juliana O'Rourke spoke with Roger Crabtree and Romy Rawlings
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