Design review

Tourist guides—a consumer test


For the past three years I have visited a major US city—Boston, Los Angeles and New York—under similar conditions (a week-long conference with one day free for sight-seeing), and bought a guidebook. The three guides collected in this way make an interesting comparison, and may stimulate thoughts about information design issues of wider relevance. Tourist guides, like many other handbooks aimed at a general audience, are typically the products of insiders trying to guess at the needs of outsiders—what they know or think already, and what they will want to know more about once they know a little.

The conditions of my visits were probably not unypical of other users of these guides. I had very limited time and wanted to make the best use of it, so I used the guides to select worthwhile places to visit, to find out how to get there quickly, and to inform me about them once I had arrived. Except for a very brief visit to New York, I had no prior knowledge of the cities.

In Boston I bought *Arthur Frommer’s Guide to Boston*, one of a popular series that covers a range American and European cities and includes the famous Europe on $15 a day (although perhaps inflation has by now forced another change of title). The Frommer guides are traditional paperbacks written in a readable and enthusiastic prose style, with frequent headings and key words in bold (see Figure 1). They have a few small maps and sketches of famous sights, but you really need a proper street map as well; indeed, their discursive style discourages you from taking anything they say as completely authoritative. It is assumed that you are on a budget, you want to find a comfortable hotel, eat at interesting places, see some sights, do some shopping and then maybe go out somewhere in the evening. It’s rather like having an American friend to advise you—she tells a little of the history of a restaurant, sometimes an anecdote about its manager; she tells you what she ate there and what
you might like. Sometimes she tells you who you might expect to see there—lawyers and judges from the courts nearby, or actors in the theatre district. Armed with this advice you set off purposefully, but lose your way or get side-tracked and end up somewhere else just as good.

Overall, I found the Frommer guide to Boston unpretentious and useful for making decisions about what to do next, but it was not particularly helpful during an expedition. The lack of an index, good maps, and a cross-referencing system between chapters made it difficult to, say, find which eating places are near to which museums; they are dealt with in separate chapters with no cross referencing between them.

In Los Angeles in 1981 I bought \textit{LA/Access}, the official publication of the Los Angeles 200 Committee (to celebrate the city's anniversary). This is a colourful and attractive production with numerous maps and sketches. While I had bought the Frommer guide simply to find my way around Boston, \textit{LA/Access} immediately struck me as review-worthy, although considerably more expensive than Frommer's Los Angeles guide or other rivals. It is very definitely a graphic design product, something that demands that you notice its image as well as its content. Perhaps at this point I should have remembered Beatrice Warde's comparison of typography to a crystal goblet. Good typography, like a crystal goblet, should perfectly display its contents while drawing little attention to itself. In short \textit{LA/Access} is beautiful but its cartography just doesn't work. More on the maps later.

While the Frommer guide is organised by subject—hotels, restaurants, sights and so on—\textit{LA/Access} is organised geographically, making it much more useful for combining different kinds of activity. Figure 2 shows a typical spread. Each area of the city is introduced with a map and a short historical summary. Noteworthy places are then listed with short descriptive paragraphs, colour-coded to distinguish between discussions of architecture, parks, restaurants, shops and museums. Most have numbers which can be located on the map, but the significance of the order of listing is never explained—there is no 'how to use this guide' section. Sometimes places are listed in the order you might encounter them on a drive through the area, but not always. The tactfully suggested route is reinforced when something is mentioned but assigned no number to locate it on the map, suggesting that it is to be found between the preceding and following numbered items. There is no way of checking. On page 27, for instance (see Figure 2), there is no way of finding Miracle Mile for sure.

\textit{LA/Access} offers altogether more substantial information than the Frommer guide—entertainment, hotels and shops are still covered, but together with more solid facts about the history, culture and architecture of Los Angeles—and its style is less grating but equally informal. One of the objectives of \textit{LA/Access} was to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the city for its residents and it succeeds notably. Overall it is readable and interesting—absorbingly so at times—and represents a prodigious research effort. I bought it as a visitor's guide, though, and in this role it was disappointing. Like the Frommer guide, it was helpful when choosing somewhere to go but not a lot of use in the field.

While \textit{LA/Access} is editorially excellent, it is graphically disappointing—but only if you judge by functional criteria. By purely aesthetic standards it is well-produced, consistent and designerly in the style that might be termed American-Swiss—nothing but Helvetica in sight, but less grid-boundedly purist, not afraid to centre the occasional heading. Its crisp, economical and modern maps lose some dignity, though, by their 3-D effect shadow lines—an unnecessary and distracting habit which present-day designers of
Wilshire Boulevard predeces the founding of the city, existing first as a path followed by the Yang-Na Indians from their Elsian Hills settlement to the tar pits of Hancock Park where they obtained pitch to waterproof their homes.

Today's Wilshire runs 16 miles from the center of downtown to the Pacific Ocean in Santa Monica. The Wilshire District was the harbinger of decentralization in Los Angeles. The street traverses ethnically and economically diverse neighborhoods: from the Harbor Freeway to Lafayette Park is a settlement of thousands of new immigrants from Central America, Mexico, the Philippines, Southeast Asia, and Korea; professional firms line the boulevard with new high-rises from Lafayette Park to La Brea Avenue; and finally, the "Miracle Mile" shopping district, a development of the 1930s, is located from La Brea to La Cienega Boulevard. Both the boulevard and the area are named after H. Gaylord Wilshire (1861-1927), a real-estate entrepreneur from Ohio who made and lost fortunes in orange and walnut farming, gold mining, patent therapeutic electric belts, and real-estate development. During the real-estate boom of the 1880s, Wilshire created a tract through which ran an unpaved road, naming it for himself.

Oil fever captured the city shortly after Edward Doheny struck oil near Second Street and Glendale. (Amazingly, Doheny did it with a shovel, digging 16 feet into the hillside to discover a small pool of oil.) By 1905, the neighborhood was dotted with oil wells. Many fortunes were made from the black resource beneath Wilshire, including that of the Hancock family who owned a farm around the well-known tar pits near Wilshire and Fairfax. The Hancock Park-Wilshire lid was raised and rapidly exhausted; the tar pits and a few disregarded modern wells are the only remains of the once-booming local economy.

Freeway Overpass. Between Figeuroa and Beaudry Streets, Wilshire Boulevard passes over the Harbor Freeway. There is a particularly good view from this spot of the "stacks" interchange, where the Hollywood, Harbor, Pasadena, and San Bernardino Freeways intersect to form the hub of the Southern California Freeway system.

Andrews's Hardware Store. The world's most palatial hardware store, 1610 W. Seventh St.

7 Bullocks Wilshire. One of the glistering jewels of Wilshire Boulevard was the 14-story tower of Bullocks Wilshire, which houses the show of the century, its retail extravaganza. The Bullock's Wilshire building is one of the most elegant in the city. Counting the beheadings of the nearby silk stock exchange, the building is one of the most elegant in the city. The 14th-floor Tea Room is a delightful room, with its own tea garden atmosphere.

8 Sheraton-Town House. A luxury hotel in the midst of the city with tennis courts, swimming pools, saunas, and tennis courts. The Sheraton-Town House is one of the most elegant in the city. The 14th-floor Tea Room is a delightful room, with its own tea garden atmosphere.

9 Lafayette Park. This is another one of the oldest public parks in Los Angeles. It includes a recreation area with tennis courts, basketball courts, and a picnic area. The park is a delight, with its own tea garden atmosphere.

10 Ambassador Hotel. Built in 1921 at the then phenomenal cost of $5 million, the Ambassador Hotel is one of the most elegant in the city. The 14th-floor Tea Room is a delightful room, with its own tea garden atmosphere.

11 Wilshire Hyatt Hotel. A luxury hotel featuring a swimming pool and room of a nearby health club. 3515 Wilshire Blvd. 381-7411
maps, graphs and charts of all kinds seem to be having trouble shaking off.

The maps, in fact, were the main source of functional problems. As a user, I found it completely impossible to get a workable impression of the city’s layout or to find my way around. Each city area is mapped as an island—nothing beyond its borders is indicated to relate it to its neighbours—and matched by colour-code and a reference number to a master map at the beginning of the guide. The master map, however, shows no roads and very few landmarks, although there are separate freeway and bus maps to the same scale but with no area indications. None of these whole-city maps is therefore much use in helping piece together the area maps. The problem is compounded by the realisation that each map appears in a different scale, determined by the amount of detail to be shown and the column width to be filled. Each is edited independently, so that when a road runs off a particular map, there is no guarantee that it will appear anywhere else.

The problem of finding the same road on different maps is compounded by another Pavlovian response of present-day formalists to map design tasks—without a good excuse or a doctor’s note no line is permitted to join another except at angles of ninety or forty-five degrees. The grid idea can lead to interesting and ingenious symbol designs (such as those for the Munich Olympics, for instance), and it can be appropriately applied to network diagrams; but it can devastate the integrity of maps. Although it was seen as permissible on the large city maps, it would not have worked with the smaller area maps, and so these are mostly allowed to be natural, even if somewhat stylised. The problem is that the same road no longer has the same shape on maps of different scale.

In New York earlier this year (1982) I chose the Michelin New York City Tourist Guide, another product of a specialist guidebook publisher but rather different in character from the Arthur Frommer series. It shares characteristics with both of the other guides, although it is more similar in structure to the LA guide. A large pull-out map at the beginning displays the whole of Manhattan, and smaller area maps are provided for each geographically based section. Similarly there are general sections on particular aspects of the city—its history, economy, culture and so on. Like the Frommer guide, though, you are directed on suggested walks (although Michelin is somewhat hesitant about recommending visitors to walk through Harlem—having identified ‘the most lively areas’ it suggests that you travel through them during the day). You are told the distance and estimated duration of each tour (though, interestingly, not of the Harlem one—perhaps you never return) and detailed comments are provided about the main features.

Each feature is given considerably more discussion than either of the other guides reviewed here, although fewer are listed in total. This is because while both the others cover entertainment quite thoroughly—hotels, restaurants, theatres and shops—the Michelin guide mostly limits its scope to ‘culture’—architecture, parks, museums and galleries. The coverage of some of these is so good that, unless you have time for an extended visit, you don’t need to buy extra guides in museums and galleries—the Metropolitan Museum of Art is given ten full pages, and smaller galleries correspondingly fewer. Michelin’s writing style is also noticeably more formal than that of the others, with occasional slightly cryptic literary references in the headings. No author is credited, but it is printed in France and has a noticeable but not overwhelming French flavour to it. Key comparisons are made with Parisian counterparts—the Empire State Building with the Eiffel Tower (which surprisingly turns out to be nearly as high), and the areas of Manhattan and Paris. Like French
ROCKEFELLER CENTER AREA

Distance: about 1 mile    Time: 31/2 hours (not including guided tours or museums)

Located in the heart of Manhattan, between Sixth and Seventh Avenues and 47th and 52nd Streets, Rockefeller Center is an imposing group of harmoniously designed skyscrapers, most of which were constructed before World War II. The various buildings are connected by the Concourse, a maze of underground passages lined with shops. A private street, Rockefeller Plaza, crosses the area from north to south. Once a year, it is closed for a day so that it does not become public property.

The 19 buildings cover about 22 acres and are used mostly for business purposes. The total of 953,730 square feet of offices space is a working population of more than 90,000. If we add the number of tourists who visit each day we have a population nearly the size of Alaska's (720,000). Columbia University, which owns half of the land, receives a base rental of $9 million a year.

ROCKEFELLER CENTER AREA

VISIT

We suggest the following itinerary for a brief visit (see map):

- **RCA Building**: The first stop is the RCA Building, where you can see the famous murals by Diego Rivera. The building is open daily from 10 AM to 5 PM.
- ** Rockefeller Center and 5th Avenue**: After visiting the RCA Building, take a stroll along 5th Avenue. You'll find many shops and restaurants.
- **Empire State Building**: Next, head over to see the Empire State Building. You can climb up to the observation deck for a panoramic view of the city.
- ** Chrysler Building**: Finish your visit with a visit to the Chrysler Building. You can take the elevator to the top floor to see the city from above.

The Empire State Building is one of the most iconic landmarks in New York City. It stands at 1,250 feet tall and was the tallest building in the world from 1931 until 1971. The observation deck offers breathtaking views of the cityscape, including the Statue of Liberty and Central Park.

Fields and meadows. - At the beginning of the 19th century, the site now occupied by Rockefeller Center was part of the "Commons Lands". The area was used for grazing purposes by the English. The site was later acquired by the city for $6,800 to establish a public botanical garden which he called "Elgin Garden".

City blocks and brownstones. - By 1850, the present gridiron pattern of streets and avenues was laid out, and the first buildings appeared on the site. By the end of the 19th century, it was part of a fashionable residential district. Splendid mansions rose on both sides of the new streets, and the area became known as the "brownstone belt".

John D. Rockefeller, Jr. - Son of the oil multi-millionaire and father of the "Rockefeller Brothers", John D. Jr. leased the land from Columbia in 1929. The lease ran for 24 years and was made renewable until 1951, when the land and building were reverted to the University. In 1953, the renewal options were extended to 2069. With the exception of the Metropolitan Opera House, Rockefeller had first planned a giant opera house, but the great depression forced his hand to this project.

**THE CHANNEL GARDENS**

A relaxing spot, the "Channel Gardens" (so named because they separate the French and British buildings) contain a series of pools, surrounded by flower beds which are changed quarterly during the season. Beginning with Easter Lilies and Good Friday, flowers continue to bloom throughout the year. A splendid set of lighting displays add to the pleasure of this green oasis.

The Channel promenade leads down to the Lower Plaza, an open area below street level, and offers views of the fountains of the United Nations. At the top of the steps leading to the Lower Plaza is a plaque citing "John D. Jr.'s Creations". An outdoor restaurant in summer, the Plaza serves as a skating rink in winter.

On the floor above the Lower Plaza stands a bronze statue lid in gold of Prometheus stealing the sacred fire for mankind. Every December, a huge Christmas tree stands from 85 to 90 feet above the statue. Visitors come to admire the colored lights or to hear occasional concerts of Christmas carols.

**RCA (RCA Corporation) BUILDING**

Seventy stories tall, soaring 850 feet above street level, the tallest building of Rockefeller Center's towers is also the most harmonious architecturally. Sightseers can enjoy the seventy of its lines.

The main entrance at 30 Rockefeller Plaza leads to the lobby, decorated with immense murals depicting man's progress through the ages. Notice the remarkable effect of perspective. These murals are actually the second series executed for the RCA Building. The first set, designed by the American painter Diego Rivera, were found to be too radical by John D. Jr. Murals with a similar theme were later displayed in the Bell Telephone Building in Mexico City. The Rockefeller Center Guided Tours office is located on the main floor of this building.

**Observation Roof**

Open from 10 AM to 5 PM daily. Last entry: 4:30 PM. Admission: $1.00. The Observation Roof is included in all guided tours (except the one mentioned above). Take the express elevator which goes 16 miles an hour to the 68th floor.
industrial design, there are occasional strange features which turn out to have an ingenious practicality—like the title printed twice on the spine, a different way up at each end, readable whichever way up the guide is stacked in the bookshop.

Editorially, all three guides succeed while aiming at slightly different markets. Graphically, Michelin is without doubt the best. It is much less stylish than LA/Access but completely functional. The typography is undistinguished but acceptable, but the maps are excellent in every way. They are unpretentious and totally practical, based on conventional plan-views with key landmarks represented pictorially. I had no trouble finding my way around, and could always locate and recognise buildings featured in the text. Figure 3 shows a typical spread.

What makes a good guidebook? Undoubtedly it must be accurate. I didn’t find any problems with these guides; although the Michelin guide was published in 1978 and still on sale in 1982, its avoidance of entertainment coverage—which must be up to date—saves embarrassment. The other guides were new editions—the Frommer guide was labelled 1979-80 on the cover and is apparently updated every two years. LA/Access was produced for a special occasion, but in view of the investment in this initial edition it seems likely that it will be kept in print—perhaps updated for the forthcoming Olympics. If so, it is to be hoped that the maps can be improved even if it means resisting the competitive formalist design fever which usually afflicts Olympic host cities.

A guidebook should also be usable—it should be possible to plan a trip, and when on it find where you are. Indexing, cross-referencing and good maps are thus as essential as the descriptions of places and routes. Michelin was a clear winner here, followed by LA/Access. Frommer had no index and few maps; you are expected to read it straight through, and it is easy to get confused. You could not rely on it as your only source.

The matter of style also arises. Michelin is consistently polite, with plenty of interesting but restrained anecdotes. Frommer describes itself as resulting from ‘... on-the-spot observations and personal experience, in the grand tradition of good travel writing’. It is written from the point of view of the average mid-westerner with a certain innocence and enthusiasm about everything encountered. Good travel writing, though, is a rather different thing. It’s readable even if you never go there in away that Frommer guides are not. Indeed, good travel writers don’t usually feel obliged to enthuse you about a place, to make you want to go there. A more authentic combination of travel writing and guidebook might be Helene Hanff’s Apple of my eye, an account of how she wrote a guide to New York. It’s a charming book which would serve as a reasonable, if eccentric, substitute for the equivalent Frommer guide.

LA/Access, too, has enthusiasm, but rather in the manner of a public relations department of a large corporation. I did not object to this. In fact it was refreshing to find completely straight descriptions of those features of Southern California which no European writer could resist witticising about—Forest Lawn cemetery, for instance (the model for Evelyn Waugh’s The loved ones), or Robert Schuller’s drive-in church and Crystal Cathedral.

Until I remembered that I was in Southern California I did, however, find myself objecting to LA/Access’s over-enthusiasm about itself. Its covers, but mercifully not its inside pages, are packed with hype—the real thing. I was curious, for instance, at the label ‘an energy conscious guide’ on a lavishly produced book that was quite clearly not printed on recycled paper, until I noticed that it was sponsored by the Arco oil company.

The credited author gets star billing, although assisted by a staff of sixteen, and he offers this
explanation of why we need maps:

The desire to use, learn and access the resources of a city is proportional to the ability to understand its configuration. LA/ACCESS is designed, indeed dedicated, to the reduction of anxiety and disorientation, allowing both the visitor and the resident the easiest format for efficiently accessing the many availabilities that surround us in the City of the Angels.

All three of these guides were basically appreciative of the cities they described—appropriately so, in my view, since they are important and formidable places. The questions of bias and accountability nevertheless remain: how much should a guide book tell? does it have a duty to the reader to warn as well as to enthuse? what personal tastes does it assume in its readership? Clearly readers must read critically and relatively—a feature which would evoke considerable comment when found in an otherwise barren small town might escape notice in the context of a big city with competing attractions. (For instance, I was recently proudly shown ‘the largest slaughterhouse in the southern hemisphere’ while visiting a town in Queensland, Australia.) Most of us are aware, too, that most modern cities are suffering from similar social problems of inner city decay, increasing violence and so on; we know that we may be robbed or cheated anywhere. Nevertheless, we are right to expect to be warned about particularly unsafe areas or practices.

Ultimately, of course, specialist guidebook publishers such as Arthur Frommer or Michelin must achieve a reputation for reliability and usability in the long term. If you eat a disappointing meal at a recommended restaurant, not only do you not go there again but you also lose faith in your guide. In a similar way, spectacular but unfunctional graphic design can devalue the reputation of the whole profession.

It is inevitable, too, that guidebook authors cannot easily avoid addressing an ‘average reader’

of some kind, and, as these guides have shown, this will be somewhat different depending whether they are from France, California, the Mid-West or wherever. And resident-authored guides are perhaps bound to be rather less objective about the shortcomings of their particular home than an outsider might be. I have always been amused, though, by this exception. Obviously written by a resident, this excerpt from The Shell Guide to Britain describes my own part of the world:

‘Alas, the gourmet draws a blank in this part of England . . . The traditional country dishes of Northants and Bedfordshire have, perhaps mercifully, died out; for they were apparently designed to fight the long, hard, damp Midland winters. There is virtually no spring in the East Midlands—a feature of the English climate which never seems to be recorded in the books. One discovers this grim secret by long residence. Hence such a dish as the ‘Bedfordshire Clanger’, a suet roll filled with meat and onions at one end and passing through other things to jam at the far end, the idea being that one had a complete meal en route through the roll. Mercifully, science has found other ways of fighting cold and hunger than this, and the Clanger is now only a folk-memory.’ (page 407)

Robert Waller
Bournehroy G (ed) 1975
The Shell Guide to Britain
Ebury Press, London

Hanniff H 1977
Apple of my eye
Andre Deutsch, London