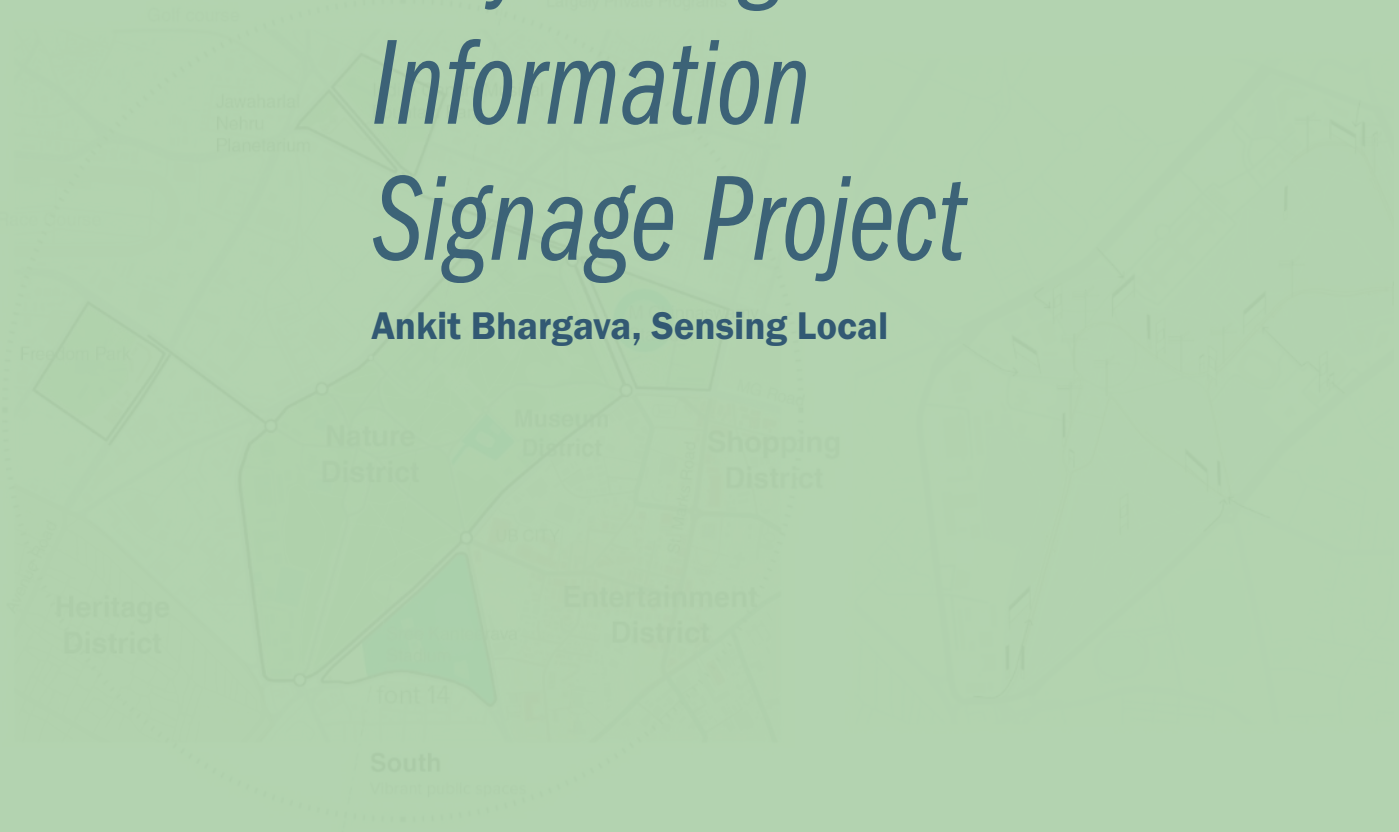GATEWAY SIGNAGE

Cubbon Park

Wayfinding and Information Signage Project
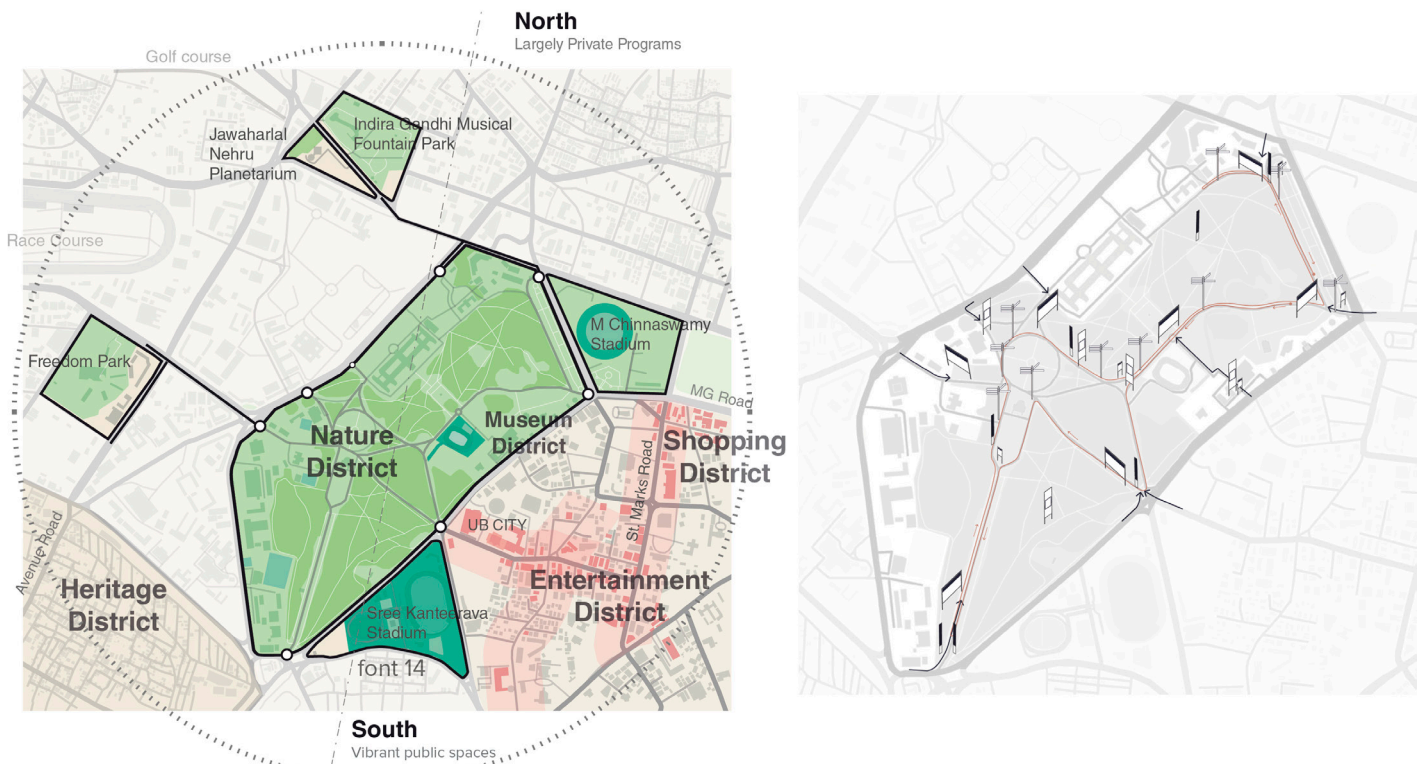
Ankit Bhargava, Sensing Local

Figure 1. Larger cultural district of Cubbon Park and the placement of the signage system

The Cubbon Park Wayfinding and Information Signage Project is a bilingual signage system in Cubbon Park, Bengaluru, conceived to ease navigation and showcase its history, culture and biodiversity. The project was created in 2018 as a collaboration between two organisations - Sensing Local and Native Place, Bengaluru. It has materialised through the support of the Karnataka Tourism Department, in partnership with the Horticulture Department, since this park is one of the most popular destinations for city residents and visitors alike. The park spans 197 acres and is the second largest park in the city, with nearly 150 years of history. Cubbon Park was known as the 'People's Park', and it stays true to this identity even today.

Moreover, Cubbon Park is also at the centre of a larger cultural district neighbouring the popular Vittal Mallya Road-Lavelle Road area, and is surrounded by the highest density of museums, shopping streets, other public parks like Freedom Park, and historical areas, including the old *Pete* area (Figure 1). Hence, it serves as an entry point to the myriad of these cultural destinations within walkable distance.

Overall the signage covers information about the historical and cultural significance of the park, the stories about the monuments and statues, and provides navigation information. The content in the signage system was created by aggregating cartographic layers using primary surveys and secondary sources, archival texts and pictures from state libraries, and three rigorous participatory processes. The unique features in the signage include a bloom cycle for the park, where the signage shows which trees flower in different seasons.

The system includes 76 pieces and six types of signage placed across the entire park (Figure 2).

Gateway signage is the first signage a visitor entering the park encounters (Figure 3). It contains the complete map of the park, landmarks, park's history, activities, location of clusters and avenues of blooming trees, etc. It also includes a notice board for people to put up posters of events in the park. Lastly, since it is also the last signage a visitor would see while leaving the park, it hosts a neighbourhood map of nearby landmarks within walking distance. There are seven signage pieces in total that mark each of the seven entrance gates.
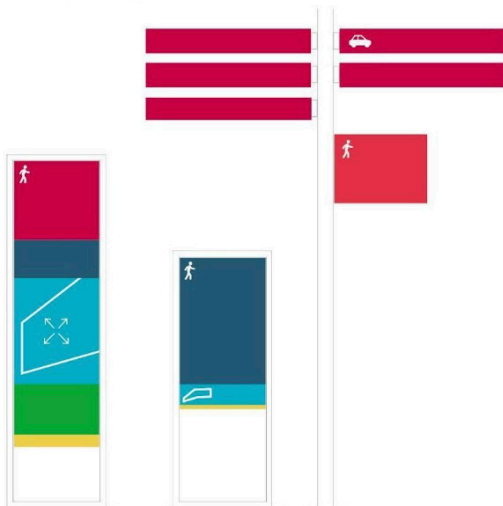
Signage as a system

About the Park
Orientation and direction
Discovery & Navigation | History & Culture
Things to do
Nature
Events / New Found Stories
Disabled Access

GATEWAY
At entry and exit points

INNER GATEWAY
Inbetween destinations and at decision making points

DESTINATION
At key monuments: Interpretive and Interactive Information

DIRECTIONAL
For both vehicles and pedestrians

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4b

Figure 4a

The inner gateway signage is a smaller version of the gateway signage that marks the entrances to the individual gardens in the park's interior (Figure 4a). The map here is a 'heads-up map' to help visitors orient themselves. It also highlights biodiversity and amenities such as toilets and drinking water in the vicinity. The rear of this signage is intentionally left empty to create real estate that can be co-opted to tell other stories of the park by different contributors.

The destination signage is located at key landmarks such as the statues and institutions that dot the park (Figure 4b). The signage follows a simple template that showcases a short historic text alongside an archival photo and a fun factoid.

The directional signage is located along the roads passing through the park, primarily to aid vehicular movement and double up to serve pedestrians. In addition to the above, the signage system also contains a network of markers for the 5km jogging route and scenic experience routes.

Given the size of the park and the variety of content, the signange was designed by following the principle of progressive disclosure. It means the information unfolds itself gradually and strategically to the user.

image of the park

An integral part of the signage is a map of the park with 35 layers of data, created by integrating information from tree surveys, on-site mapping and open source maps and inputs from various designers, typographers, and historians. The mapmaking included accurately representing the boundary and edge conditions of the park and walking paths, heritage and flowering trees, tree avenues, and amenities such as benches, toilets, etc. It is now the most authentic representation of the map, and government authorities have also adopted it as the park's official map internally.

making (of the) public

The design of the signage projects followed a highly participatory process. The key reasons were:

1. The park is a significant historical public space, and so any intervention has to be mindful of its value.

2. The park is used throughout the day by many different types of people and for various purposes. Understanding their needs and their inclusion in the project was critical to creating useful and usable signage.

3. The information about the park was either fragmented or missing. Therefore, it had to be gathered and mapped from many different sources with the support of other users and domain experts.

The participatory process consisted of three exercises undertaken through the journey of the project using a unique set of themes and purposes (Figure 5).

(1) What is Cubbon Park to you?

'As the project was expected to unfold and become yet another piece of infrastructure in the city, the participatory exercise was imagined as a moment to ask - what is the park to the people?'

The first workshop captured inputs regarding who visits the park. What do people do in the park? And importantly, what would they like the signage system to do?

(2) Unpeeling the layers of the park through six experiential walks

'There is a philosophical thought that everything exists only in language. There is no Cubbon Park except in language. It is only in a shared agreement that the physical space we speak of is a 'Park' called 'Cubbon Park'. Each person conceives their park through how they experience it and interpret it. Therefore, describing it in different languages can provide entirely unique versions of the park. Sharing these stories and enrolling others in them can alter the agreement about the park and its reality. The 'Cubbon Park Wayfinding Project' situated itself at the confluence of this process of enrollment, agreement and reality.'

The purpose of the second workshop was to unpack 'ways of seeing' and 'ways of showing' the park in a multi-linguistic way.

(3) Test the prototype on-site with park users

Upon completing the design development process, one of each type of signage was placed in the park to test how the park visitors felt about the signage design, information content, readability, colour schema, etc.

Conclusion

The signage system for Cubbon Park has been a unique and one-of-a-kind exercise. To an extent, it has set a precedent for the value of signage systems, particularly in public spaces. However, some of the major challenges in this project included underestimating the value of the following aspects:
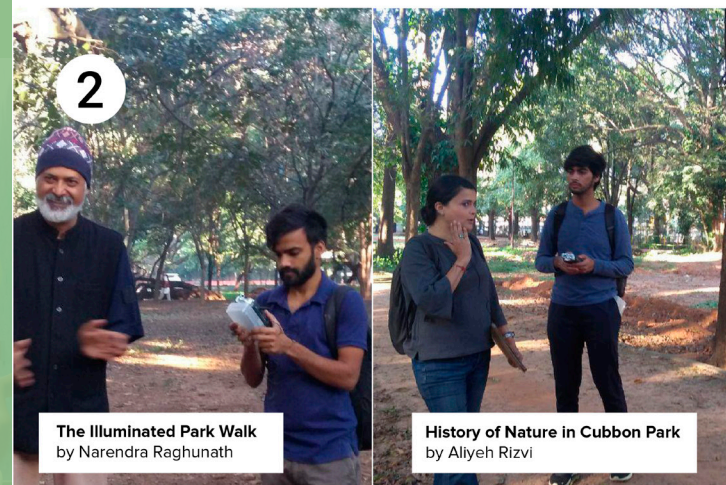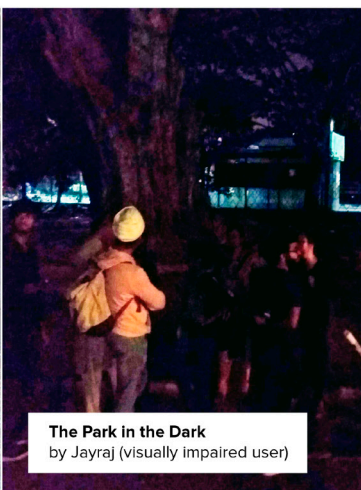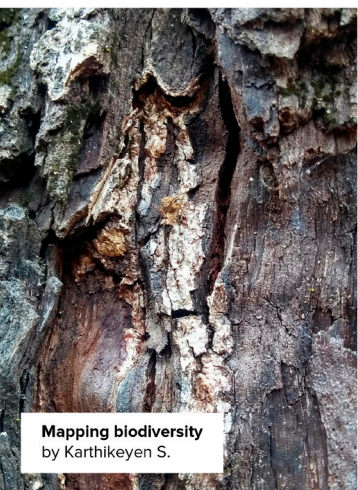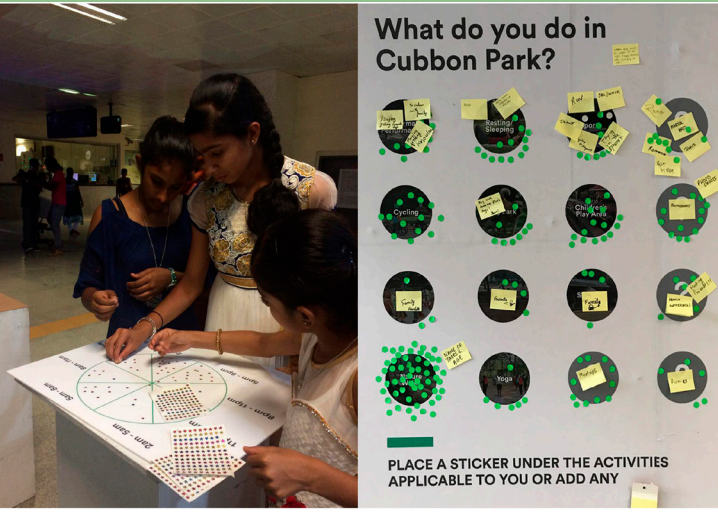

The Illuminated Park Walk
by Narendra Raghunath

History of Nature in Cubbon Park
by Aliyeh Rizvi

Figure 5

What do you do in Cubbon Park?

PLACE A STICKER UNDER THE ACTIVITIES APPLICABLE TO YOU OR ADD ANY

Mapping biodiversity
by Karthikeyen S.

The Park in the Dark
by Jayraj (visually impaired user)

Scale
The signage pieces often got lost in the scale of the park. While human-scale design is essential, signage systems are not just about organising information, but signage is also an object in the landscape. A user needs to be able to spot the signage first before they can read the information in it. It means accounting for all the environmental conditions is key.

Tree shade and dynamic light conditions
The colour scheme in the signage did not fully account for the variation in light in the park. The signage was designed to be gentle and blend in, but this was in some ways counterintuitive to its core purpose. The signage pieces' location was also decided by identifying sightlines and on-ground feasibility, but the effects of tree shade on the spot were not considered significant. As a result, some of the signage pieces in the shade appear less legible than intended.

Information versus branding
Despite several rounds of design interactions, the gateway signage in particular valued information over branding. This meant the signage was more crowded than it needed to be; this limited its readability and attractiveness.

To conclude, the Cubbon Park Wayfinding and Information Signage Project was not only important in itself, but also represented a first step to informing park-planning in the future and increasing the legibility of public space in our cities.

Note: All graphics and images belong to the author.

Ankit Bhargava is an architect and urban planner with over ten years of experience in spatial planning, urban governance, system design, and architecture projects. He is deeply interested in using systems thinking and participatory processes to unpack complex systems and shape new perspectives that drive systemic change.
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