

AUSTIN + MERGOLD

November 2008

NYC Blazes

A project for Architecture League's *Make a Difference in Two Days*

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In answering the 48-hour design activism challenge we were interested in working for the large yet ephemeral 'New Yorker community', which is typically only visible during extraordinary events. The New York City subway system transcends traditional boundaries of local neighborhoods; everyone uses the subway—from the Mayor to schoolchildren and tourists—but it exists in parallel with the city geography above it. Re-emerging into the city through a subway station is often confusing even for a "seasoned" New Yorker, much less for a visitor, because the standard NYC subway entrance fails to orient the traveler.

Our research focused on understanding the problem (and particularly problematic locations), and identifying the language of wayfinding appropriate to the subway and its users. What we found was that both local residents and tourists rely on the idea of uptown and downtown to anchor themselves within the city, and use iconic landmarks serve as primary way-finding devices. The Empire State Building has long denoted 'uptown', while the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center demarcated 'downtown' until 2001. Since then, there has been no substitute.

As a result of our discoveries, we developed a strategy that provides a visual reminder for the missing downtown landmark of the WTC towers. Directional signs pointing toward Ground Zero serve both as a functional wayfinding device and as a poetic remembrance. Adopting the language of weathervanes and trail blazes, we imagine these devices deployed throughout the city. The design infiltrates the infrastructure of existing NYC signage typologies in the subway and on the street. The figure/void relationship of the skyline allows the physical icon to emerge at the subway exit while reflecting the absence of the towers in the streetscape.

NYC Blazes orient people (subway riders and pedestrians alike) by pointing out 'downtown' and thus allowing them to navigate their immediate environment. The project also directs people toward Ground Zero, a site that embodies the economic and emotional heart of the city, and serves as a distributed memorial.



Prototypes installed at 22nd St & Broadway

For more information, visit www.austin-mergold.com