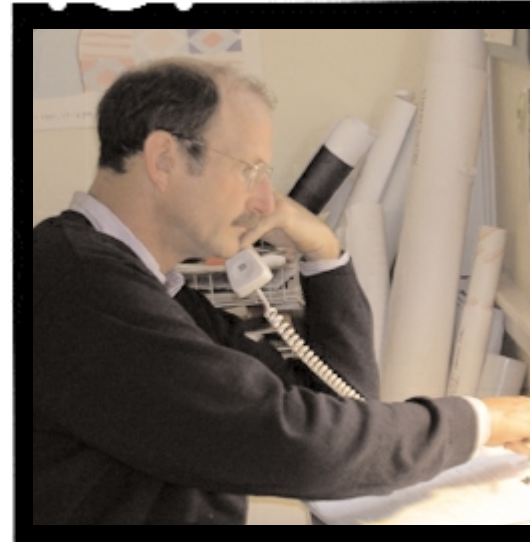


A Day with a Graphic Designer

The designer: Jon Roll, president of Jon Roll & Associates, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The firm: A staff of 10 designers, specializing in signage, labeling, and interpretive graphics — work that helps people to navigate and understand buildings and public spaces.

The office: The second floor of a large 1820s house in Harvard Square. The office is essentially one big airy room, divided into workspaces by two massive chimneys with back-to-back fireplaces. The walls are lined with art books, design journals, and numerous white binders chronicling previous projects. A radio is tuned to Harvard's exam-period orgies — hours of Ray Charles followed by hours of Rachmaninoff.



The day:

7:30 Arriving at this hour, Jon is able to snag an on-street parking space, a rarity in Harvard Square.

7:35 Takes a cup of coffee, which he never gets around to drinking. Looks at the stuff on his desk and his computer, thinking aloud about what needs to get done today: “Way too much.”

What's really exciting him this morning is yesterday's presentation to the Arnold Arboretum about a possible signage project. Doing preparatory research, Jon was intrigued to learn that the Arboretum was laid out according to the Bentham and Hooker sequence, a plant-classification system devised by British botanists in the 1870s. The sequence groups plants according to blossom structure, and was intended as a reference tool, not a planting scheme. But Olmsted and Sargent, the Arboretum's designers,

used topography and curving paths to accommodate plants' diverse soil and light requirements, positioning horticulturally strange bedfellows in correct scholarly order.

It's a story, and Jon likes stories. He's already beginning to imagine using elements of graphic design — maps and signage — but he's also considering a cell phone system that would let visitors call in and listen to pre-recorded information. “The place is a living reference book. But it's also a public park, and our labeling needs to address different audiences: the casual visitor, the expert, and the *expert* expert. How do we orient people without being intrusive?”

9:10 Reviews a signage project for Bennington College with a senior designer who has worked with him on and off for 20 years. They presented design concepts at the college a few

days ago, and now are incorporating the responses for a presentation to the trustees in New York next week. They whip through a list of things to be done, speaking in a shorthand possible only between longtime colleagues. He looks at a mock-up of a sign for the college arts center. “Hmm, that text size, you might want to —”

“Yup, yup, I already noticed that,” she says.

9:45 Another colleague of years, a writer, shows up to accompany Jon to a brainstorming session regarding the Charlestown Navy Yard. Under the state's Chapter 91 regulations, any development there needs to provide continuous public waterfront access, amenities, and interpretive information. The Navy Yard has been studied and analyzed many times already; the challenge for the project team will be to come up with ideas that don't feel like just another iteration of the same old thing.

9:50 Jon and his colleague leave for the meeting. In the car, they marvel at today's front-page *Boston Globe* article, which recommends 60 to 90 minutes of exercise each day.

Jon: “Who has that kind of time?”

10:00 Besides Jon and the writer, the meeting includes a team of urban planners and an artist who does installations in public spaces. Sitting around a table in the artist's studio, the group focuses on several key issues. Right now the Navy Yard is an obstacle course of concrete barriers and unclear access points. What would make it an appealing destination? What kind of pathway could run along the water's edge? Jon has brought along several boards on which he's pasted old photographs and engravings showing the shipyard's industrial and military history. "What are the stories this place wants to tell?"

11:20 As the meeting continues, different perspectives emerge. The planners are concerned with circulation: how would people move through the space? Jon and the artist start to think about what the place might look like. The blank-slateness of the site appeals to them. They keep saying, "Whatever

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happens here, it needs to be big." With the exception of the USS *Constitution*, the current Navy Yard is oddly invisible. With bold enough design elements and infrastructure, it could have a dramatic visual impact from both land and water.

Jon: "We need a repeating element that creates a path along the harbor and resonates with the whole waterfront. How do you do that without being hackneyed, without just doing some dumb light on a pole?"

12:45 "We've covered a lot, and I'm toast," Jon says. The group lists tasks to be completed before their next session, and the meeting breaks up.

Inching through traffic on the Harvard stadium bridge, Jon and the writer riff on the classic rhetorical question: Why are the most interesting jobs the public ones with the least money? They move on to a more practical financial discussion: How much more time can they afford to put in, given the project's budget; and how should that time best be spent?

1:05 The parking space outside the office is gone — no surprise — and Jon stashes his car in a nearby garage.

1:25 Jon checks in again with the designer on the Bennington project. The design concept behind the signage —

simple shapes that allude to sculpture without pretending to be sculpture — grew out of the fact that the Bennington landscape reminded Jon of Storm King, the outdoor museum on the Hudson. Now the designer is refining the overall look of the new signage, Cor-Ten steel on which notices, in bright foliage-inspired colors, can be hung with magnets. She uses the computer to show Jon different options for the main entrance sign. To the right of the drive, or the left? How close to the road? Type flush-right or flush-left? Will the sign be readable after a two-foot snowfall?

Before proceeding with the final signs, the designers will field-test several mock-ups, to make sure that the materials still look good after oxidation and “a bunch of knocking around.”

2:40 Phone call from an architect, asking to meet about three project proposals. Jon is smiling when he hangs up. “If your client is a restaurant, that’s just one job. If you work for the architect who

designs the restaurant, he goes on to design something else.”

3:25 Phone call from the broker who administers the firm’s 401(k) plan. Jon wants him to come in and sit down with the staff. “It’s good for morale when people understand where the money is and what the strategy is.”

He interrupts himself to call across to the designer on the Bennington project, whose computer screen is visible from his desk: “Much, much better. That other way you had it was just so freakin’ *ugly*.”

She grins back. “I know.”

4:20 Sits down with another designer to review a signage program for Brandeis University. The campus requires particularly clear signage because circulation patterns, especially for cars, are confusing. Also, as Jon points out, “It’s 1948 International Style — which poses a different set of challenges from a Georgian Revival campus, where the architecture of a building connotes its

function.” The client liked the origami-like folds of one set of signage concepts, but preferred the “gestalt” of the type treatment in the other. Jon and the designer accept this vacillation philosophically, and discuss how the two concepts could be blended.

5:10 The conversation has ranged from the history of Brandeis to the fun of designing signs for a modernist campus (“You’re free to do anything”), to further refinements of the typography and colors.

Jon takes one last look at the design boards, swooping down from the big-picture overview to focus in on a detail. He points to a small, quirkily asymmetrical “Parking” sign. “These might be over-designed. They’re going to crank out hundreds of these, at \$25 apiece. Keep them simple.” ■

Joan Wickersham lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She is the author of *The Paper Anniversary* and is finishing a new book.