Signaletik takes off

How a handful of Swiss and German graphic designers in the 1970s shaped wayfinding systems all over the world for decades to come — and how they helped to bring about a commercial environment that shapes airports to this day.

»*Signaletik* is not a thing to joke around with. At the airport, people need to get places urgently. They need to park, find the toilet, and run to their gate. These are emergency situations!«, Felix Rinderer, a graphic designer and the creative director at the agency Designalltag, explained to me. I was asking him about the signage and wayfinding system (in German, *Signaletik*) that his company designed for passengers and other visitors to Zurich Airport. I asked Rinderer why airport orientation systems often look so similar. Wouldn't it be good for people in transit to experience something more unusual, with more local flavor? Why doesn't he set the signage in, for example, Schwabacher (as the typographer Rudolf Barmettler had once suggested to me, tongue-in-cheek)? Obviously, Rinderer wasn't amused. But is there more to it? Is the simplicity really for the hurried passengers' sake?

Designalltag has been in charge of Zurich Airport's wayfinding signs since Ruedi Rüegg founded the agency in 1989. In Designalltag's portfolio, Rüegg wrote, »design is not permitted to care about itself, rather, it serves concrete ends and goals. The function of the form is not to make itself interesting, rather, to do the thing it is meant to do.«[1] However, there remains a difference between the thing that wayfinding signage is meant to do, and the things it actually does. Wayfinding signage not only guides us smoothly to our destinations. Without having to actively search for where we need to go—with the assurance provided to us by excellent signage—we are free to read and respond to advertisements. Indeed, one of the lesser known aspects of signage design history is this: Designing Zurich Airport's orientation signage was entangled with the development of the airport as a retail environment. Orientation and consumption would exist in a symbiotic relationship from here on out. The history of airport wayfinding systems is the history of consumption in a place intended for something else.

Fig. 1: A cacophony of signs at Zurich Airport.

Abflug alle Gates
Departure all Gates

Fig. 2: What if the Zurich Airport signage were set in Schwabacher instead of Akzidenz-Grotesk? Schwabacher, a blackletter typeface from the 15th century, was one of the most common typefaces in the German-speaking world until the mid-20th century.

Ruedi Rüegg and the *Pionierzeit*

Ruedi Rüegg (1936–2011) was born and educated in Zurich, where he was taught by Josef Müller-Brockmann, one of the most famous exponents of the so-called »Swiss Style«. Swiss Style was a movement in the applied graphic arts that flourished in the 1950s, and it is closely associated with the boom in advertising and corporate logo design that started in the sixties. In the early seventies, Rüegg and his team at Müller-Brockmann & Co. developed the signage for Zurich Airport. Rüegg later left the agency to be self-employed, taking the Zurich Airport commission with him. Rüegg continued to work on it for over thirty years, for the rest of his life. In 1989 he founded the agency *Designalltag Zürich Ruedi Rüegg*,[2] and Designalltag is still responsible for signage design at Zurich Airport. Most recently, they made the signage for a new parking deck.

Reflecting on the early days of the Zurich airport project, Felix Rinderer, who joined Designalltag in 2006, told me, with a hint of nostalgia, »Back then, it was a *Pionierzeit*.« A pioneering time. The Zurich Airport wayfinding system *is* a piece of design history. It is one of the works (along with airports in Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Paris, and London) that led to the creation of the standards we use today (including for highway and wayfinding signage in all kinds of buildings and arenas). Rüegg was in the right place at the right time, and his work had a global reach.

The transit orientation systems of the sixties and seventies in London, Amsterdam, Paris, and, of course, Switzerland, were developed by designers heavily influenced by Swiss typography and graphic design.[3] Rüegg, under the tutelage of Josef Müller-Brockmann, and later as his partner, was at the heart of Swiss Style. An important reference for Rüegg was Müller-Brockmann's work in the sixties for the Swiss railway, the SBB, with which Rüegg had assisted. Müller-Brockmann was commissioned by the SBB to design a logo as well as the signs for all Swiss railway stations.[4] The SBB corporate branding exemplifies Swiss Style to this day.

Fig. 3: Swiss Style: Branding for the SBB (Swiss federal railways) at Zurich Airport; in the typeface Helvetica and with the logo designed by Josef Müller-Brockmann, here in 1989.

Today, wayfinding signage systems around the world look remarkably similar to each other. There are variations, but the basic recipe – so many variations on Swiss Style – stays the same: select one of three sans-serif typefaces, accompany the words with a simplified illustration, then draw an arrow. Though some signage systems use color to designate levels and categories of information, or use yellow text on black backgrounds to improve the contrast between text and background, the Zurich airport signage consists of white backlit text on black signs (known as ›reverse-out‹). Together with the airport's functional architecture, with which it effectively interacts, the signage in Zurich Airport was and continues to be, from the perspective of the client and the designer both, a wayfinding masterpiece. The design has hardly evolved since its original installation, and there is a sense that the work from 1976 is still state of the art. As the editors of the book *Flughafen Zürich 1948–2008* state, »Students and experts have repeatedly turned their attention to a critical look at the airport's *Signaletik*. No new significant insights have been discovered.«[5]

Pictograms, Typography, and *Bauetappe 3*

The airport as a space became increasingly important in the post-war years. The architecture historian Koos Bosma wrote that »[i]n industrialized societies individual mobility is of vital importance. The parking garage, the regional shopping center, and the airport are, for good reason, the main new building types of the twentieth century« – and that these three types converge in the modern European airport.[6] The issue of individual mobility in an airport relates, of course, to air travel itself, but also to the movement of passengers within the airport. And there are (and were already in the

G4

seventies) a lot of passengers. In the wake of »the tremendous advances in aviation during World War II,« commercial air travel boomed.[7] In 1949, Zurich Airport's first operating year, it served approximately 176 000 passengers. By 1971, Zurich Airport was serving 14 078 passengers on average per day.[8]

In 1970, the Zurich electorate approved a credit of 172 million Swiss Francs for *Bauetappe 3*, the third expansion of the airport in Kloten. With *Bauetappe 3*, Zurich Airport was transformed from a regional airport into an international hub, as well as a place to visit and shop. This transformation required a new wayfinding system for the newly labyrinthine space. »The easier a passenger can orient himself, the more secure he feels [...] and the more comfortable his visit to the airport will be,« as the airport architects Pfister and Partner explain, emphasizing the importance of clear wayfinding signage in a documentation of the airport expansion.[9] The assignment went to Ruedi Rüegg at MB & Co. *Bauetappe 3* commenced in 1971. In 1975, Terminal B opened with fresh signage.[10]

Fig. 4: The signage at Dulles International Airport in Virginia, USA, is set in the typeface Frutiger (designed by the Swiss type designer Adrian Frutiger) – and in a custom typeface by the Finnish architect Eero Saarinen.

Zurich then belonged to the very first airports with a unified signage system, and one of the first to use pictograms. The designers' decision to use pictograms in Zurich Airport had several reasons, Bruno Margreth explained to me: pictograms can be understood by all people, they mean the same thing worldwide, and they often require less space than text.[11] At their best, »[p]ictograms [...] create order in an often chaotic world,« as Rüegg wrote in Designalltag's 2002 pictogram anthology.[12] Pictograms, a utopian idea which originated in the interwar period, were in the Zeitgeist in the sixties and seventies, especially in the German-speaking world, where the pioneering pictogram theorists Otto Neurath and Rudolf Modley (both Austrian) had also lived and worked, as well as the German pictogram designer Otl Aicher, one of Rüegg's contemporaries. Though they never

worked together, Rüegg and Aicher were in touch and aware of the other's work.[13] Aicher's main projects at the time of the first Zurich commission included the pictogram concept for the airport in Frankfurt, and the one for the 1972 Olympics in Munich. Aicher's pictograms for the Olympics had a dynamic air about them, with the athletes' disconnected legs and limbs. The sixty Zurich airport pictograms in contrast are simple without being overly abstract; Rüegg and his team sought to draw more »realistic« pictograms than Aicher's.[14]

For decades pictograms had been part and parcel of the modernist dream of world peace through universal communication. From the twenties to the forties, the hope of Neurath and Modley was to achieve a just, peaceable, and well-informed world by developing a pictorial language that could be understood by everyone, everywhere.[15] The goals of such an illustrated »Esperanto« were to be, in Neurath's words, a language (or rather, a system of signs) that was »universal, immediate, and memorable.«[16] Pictograms were envisioned as a way to make public health campaigns more effective, to render citizens more enlightened of social issues, and to promote understanding between all peoples. Following the deaths of Neurath and Modley, the pictogram torch was picked up by Rüegg and Aicher: »In some respects«, as Keith Bresnahan points out, »the project of pictographic design as ›An Unused Esperanto‹ would find remarkable success after the 1970s as the model of much global way finding and transportation signage.«[17]

The vast majority of airports today use one of three sans-serif typefaces for their signage (Helvetica, Frutiger, or Clearview).[18] For Zurich Airport, Rüegg chose the typeface Akzidenz-Grotesk (the typeface on which Helvetica was based). Akzidenz-Grotesk was first developed in Germany in 1898 by the Berthold Type Foundry of Berlin as their »jobbing« typeface, »one that could be used as a kind of default for just about anything.«[19] Akzidenz-Grotesk was originally designed to be and used as an all-purpose commercial typeface, radiating a modern and practical, but polished vibe.

Akzidenz-Grotesk became one of the most popular typefaces in interwar Germany, when the *Neue Typografie* burst onto the graphic design scene and established fundamental typographic principles that many still adhere to today. Akzidenz-Grotesk was prized by the »New Typographers« for its functionality and legibility, a trend which continued in the fifties when Akzidenz-Grotesk (re)emerged as the go-to typeface for designers working in Switzerland, most notably Josef Müller-Brockmann.[20] In the early seventies, Karl Gerstner of the agency *Gerstner, Gredinger & Kutter* reworked Akzidenz-Grotesk for phototypesetting and then, later, for computer typesetting. Rüegg and Designalltag used the Gerstner version of the typeface for their signs in Kloten.[21]

Fig. 5: Pictograms and the typeface Akzidenz-Grotesk in Zurich Airport.

The symbiosis of wayfinding and advertising

Signs compete for our attention every minute we spend at almost any airport. Commercial signage and paid advertising, like the systems geared toward wayfinding, is seemingly unavoidable. It is impossible to look around for the information that will lead you to your gate without seeing ads for products, fast food joints, stores, and services that have nothing to do with your trip. Retail signs in all directions vie for our attention landside and airside. Posters tug at our eyes left and right on the boarding ramp, as well as en route to baggage claim. Flughafen Zürich AG writes that the signage must be »visually neutral to differentiate itself from the surrounding commercial environment.«[22]

Rüegg argued that it is important for orientation signage to have a »timeless« design in order to contrast with the surrounding retail signage: »The airport has become a fairground [...]. If we were to work with the means of entertainment, with short-lived, fashionable, trendy design elements, there wouldn't be any difference anymore. You wouldn't be able to find your way.«[23] He and his colleagues sought to distinguish their signage from the ubiquitous advertisements through both the visual design and the signs' placement, with mixed success. As Rüegg conceded: »Our way finding is black and white, without any color. Colors are used for advertising and commerce. If you follow this clearly there are fewer conflicts and a clearer division of sovereignty [...], routes belong to the signage [...]. The sides belong to commerce.«[24]

A long-time colleague of Rüegg and collaborator on Zurich Airport's orientation signage, Bruno Margreth, maintains, »The *Signaletik* is visible from a certain distance and distinguishes itself from advertisements not only visually, but also through its placement. I find it easy to distinguish between wayfinding and advertising at Zurich Airport.«[25] In some instances, that is the case, and Rüegg's strategy works out, but not always, as figure six illustrates. If wayfinding is made to steer passengers toward gates, exit

G7

doors or baggage claims, the retail environment in turn is designed to lure passengers off their paths (the installation of Duty Free stores in the passageway after the security check point and before baggage claim are only the most extreme examples). This conflict is not as huge as it might seem: Rüegg ultimately saw it as part of his job as designer of the wayfinding system to help facilitate consumption at the airport. According to Rüegg, in an airport, signage, then, has two jobs: »to guide all air passengers to their destinations with clear and highly legible information; to inform the passengers and airport visitors of the diverse shopping opportunities.«[26]

Fig. 6: The way to Duty Free.

The institutionalization of wayfinding signage for revenue

Consumption became increasingly important to the financial sustainability of airports, and effective wayfinding signage was necessary to maximize consumption. It is a subtle marketing concept: »The more comfortable his visit is, the more likely it becomes for him to shop at the airport«,[27] be it for coffee, food, jewelry, clothing, souvenirs, or liquor and perfume at Duty Free. In 2014 the US Airport Cooperative Research Program (ACRP), a section of the Transportation Research Board of the National Academies in Washington, D.C., published the first edition of its Report 109: *Improving Terminal Design to Increase Revenue Generation Related to Customer Satisfaction*. In Report 109, the ACRP explicitly stresses the importance of signage for airport profitability and the interplay between wayfinding signage and retail.

The nature and quality of a wayfinding system »can significantly affect concession performance. Many passengers rely on in-terminal directories and signage to find their gates and learn about available concessions and amenities.«[28] Directories and maps of restaurants and shops »can increase

customer satisfaction in two ways: by making the concessions easier to locate and by allowing shoppers to plan their next moves while they are purchasing concessions.«[29] The report states that providing lots of up-to-date information about departures and gates helps keep airport guests feeling secure, allowing them to »explore« the airport's commercial offerings: »An abundance of flight information display systems (FIDSs)—within retail outlets, at waiting areas, and even at individual tables—allows passengers to keep control of the situation and continue exploration of the airport.«[30] In other words, a passenger worried about being at the gate on time is less likely to buy a snack.

Fig. 7: Where does the arrow lead?

It could be said that airport wayfinding signage, just like that of a shopping mall, »should radiate not only an atmosphere of comfort and luxury, but also one of reassurance and mild euphoria [...] presented in a simple and efficient design.«[31] It should make the traveler feel classy, but also safe, in good hands. It speaks to this simple principle of consumer psychology: if we feel we are already in the lap of luxury, we are more likely to spend. The easy and pleasant walk to the gate, the clear and crisp signage, and the signs showing us not only were we need to go, but also where shops and restaurants are located, all promote consumption while we wait for our flights.

Quick orientation to what end?

Today, airports are commonly designed to make us want to buy whatever there is to buy. While Modley and his mid-twentieth century peers attempted to achieve world peace and global connectedness with pictograms, »the language of products and advertising achieved a yet more dubious goal—that of bringing together the world's peoples for greater market share through brand recognition: mass-consumption among all shoppers, everywhere.«[32] In this sense, what happened to the pictogram—its repurposing for branding and sales—has also happened to

wayfinding signage, which itself shares a common history of advertisement design: people in airports are being orchestrated to shop. Otl Aicher seemed to regret this. Writing in 1989, the ageing Aicher claimed that one could measure the well-being of a society by its communication, and that Western, modern societies' communication primarily served »commerce, business, profit, and the promise of heaven on Earth.«[33] Rüegg and his colleagues Margreth and Rinderer did and do not see this as a fundamental problem. For them, this is the reality of the world for which we seek to design elegant solutions.

I remember a conversation with my high school girlfriend about why I enjoyed being in airports. She suffered from obsessive compulsive disorder, and said that she loved airports, because they are so organized. I remember agreeing and then talking about the sense of freedom I felt in airports. As an adult, it surprises me that I used to feel free in some of the most heavily surveilled spaces on earth, but I did, and it was due to the signage. I was fourteen and without my parents, traveling between distant cities. Alone in an airport, I felt independent, out in the real world, but without fear of getting lost. The world was full of things I couldn't do yet, but at the airport, I could read the signs. At the airport, I was a proto-adult.

Fig. 8: Toilets, Gates, Dior.

Isn't that the feeling that everyone desires when they go to an airport: that they know where they're going and how to get there themselves? Perhaps the job of good signage is to turn all those who rely on it into competent

adults, prepared to act independently. But what does it really mean to be an adult in this world of moving walkways, waiting areas, and Duty Free? If »quick orientation« really means orientation for quick consumption, maybe it would be better to think about where we want to go.

Thank you to Rudolf Barmettler for his insights into typography, especially for the Schwabacher provocation; to Felix Rinderer for welcoming me at Designalltag and taking the time to answer all of my questions; to Bruno Margreth for the helpful email exchange; and to Fabian Grütter for his Wegweisung and editorial assistance.

Carolyn Kerchof is a Master's student in the program »History and Philosophy of Knowledge« at the ETH Zürich.

Abbildungsverzeichnis

Fig. 3: Unbekannt, *Hinweistafel »Flughafenbahn fly-rail« der Schweizerischen Bundesbahnen (SBB) am Flughafen Zürich-Kloten*, 1989, ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, Bildarchiv/Stiftung Luftbild Schweiz, LBS_SR04-018481.

All other photographs by the author (2017).

Literatur

1   Ruedi Rüegg: private archive, provided by Designalltag.
2   Ibid.
3   Richard Hollis: *Swiss Graphic Design: The Origins and Growth of an International Style, 1920–1965*, New Haven: Yale (2006), 254.
4   Felix Rinderer: personal interview, 13.11.2017.
5   Flughafen Zürich AG (Ed.): *Flughafen Zürich 1948–2008*, Zürich: AS Verlag (2008), 172. Translation by the author.
6   Koos Bosma: »European Airports, 1945–1995: Typology, Psychology, and Infrastructure«, in: John Zukowsky (Hg.): *Building for Air Travel: Architecture and Design for Commercial Aviation*, Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago (1996), 51–65, here 52.
7   Ibid., 52.
8   [All statistics from] Flughafen Zürich: Amt für Luftverkehr (Ed.): *Flughafen Zürich: Bauetappe 3, 1971–1975*. Zürich: Amt für Luftverkehr (1972), 6.
9   »Flughafen Zürich, Terminal B«, in: *Das Werk: Architektur und Kunst*, 63 (1976), 187–199, here 196.
10 Flughafen Zürich: Amt für Luftverkehr (Ed.): *Flughafen Zürich: Bauetappe 3, 1971–1975*. Zürich: Amt für Luftverkehr (1972), 14.
11 Bruno Margreth: personal interview, 10.01.2018.
12 Designalltag Zürich Ruedi Rüegg (Ed.): *Designalltag Pictograms*, Zürich: Designalltag (2002), 3.
13 Felix Rinderer: personal interview, 13.11.2017.
14 Ibid.
15 An overview of the rise and decline of the idealism behind early pictograms developed by Otto Neurath and Rudolf Modley can be found in: Keith Bresnahan: »›An Unused Esperanto‹: Internationalism and Pictographic Design, 1930–70«, in: *Design and Culture*, 3/1 (2011), 5–24.
16 Keith Bresnahan: »›An Unused Esperanto‹: Internationalism and Pictographic Design, 1930–70«, in: *Design and Culture*, 3/1 (2011), 5–24, here 8.
17 Ibid., 17.
18 David Zweig: »How You Know Where You're Going When You're in an Airport«, in *The Atlantic*, https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/06/how-you-know-where-youre-going-when-your e-in-an-airport/372537/ (12.06.2014).
19 Tony Seddon: *Let's Talk Type: An essential lexicon of type terms*. London: Thames & Hudson (2016), 146.
20 Richard Hollis: *Swiss Graphic Design: The Origins and Growth of an International Style, 1920–1965*, New Haven: Yale University Press (2006), 44.
21 Ruedi Rüegg, Ruedi Stoller: »Designalltag: Flughafen, Zürich [CH]«, in Erwin K. Bauer, Dieter Mayer (Hg.): *Orientation & Identity: Portraits of international way finding systems*, Wien: Springer (2009),

140–159, here 145.

22 Flughafen Zürich AG (Ed.): *Flughafen Zürich 1948–2008*, Zürich: AS Verlag (2008), 172.

23 Ruedi Rüegg, Ruedi Stoller: »Designalltag: Flughafen, Zürich [CH]«, in Erwin K. Bauer, Dieter Mayer (Ed.): *Orientation & Identity: Portraits of international way finding systems*. Wien: Springer (2009), 140–159, here 146.

24 Ibid., 150.

25 Bruno Margreth: personal interview, 10.01.2018.

26 Ruedi Rüegg: private archive, provided by Designalltag.

27 Flughafen Zürich AG (Ed.): *Flughafen Zürich 1948–2008*, Zürich: AS Verlag (2008), 174.

28 Airport Cooperative Research Program (Ed.): *Report 109: Improving Terminal Design to Increase Revenue Generation Related to Customer Satisfaction*, Washington, D.C.: (2014), 84.

29 Ibid., 10.

30 Ibid., 10.

31 Koos Bosma: »European Airports, 1945-1995: Typology, Psychology, and Infrastructure«, in: John Zukowsky (Ed.): *Building for Air Travel: Architecture and Design for Commercial Aviation*, Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago (1996), 51–65, here 61.

32 Keith Bresnahan: »›An Unused Esperanto‹: Internationalism and Pictographic Design, 1930–70«, in *Design and Culture*, 3/1 (2011), S. 5–24, here 20.

33 Otl Aicher: »Vorwort«, in: Anton Stankowski, Karl Duschek (Hg.): *Visuelle Kommunikation*, Berlin: Dietrich Reimer (1989), S. 8–10, here 9. Translation by the author.