

SENSE DESIGN

By: Tim Girvin

As designers of the “environment,” we presume that our responsibility is to consider a complete awareness of the space around us. However, most of us in this practice tend to focus on trying to provide a way for people to find a path through an experience. Over the last decade, our sensitivity to the enlarged context of experience has deepened. Part of this depth comes from the very nature of how people experience space – and the messages that come from it. In other words, brand and its outbound message.

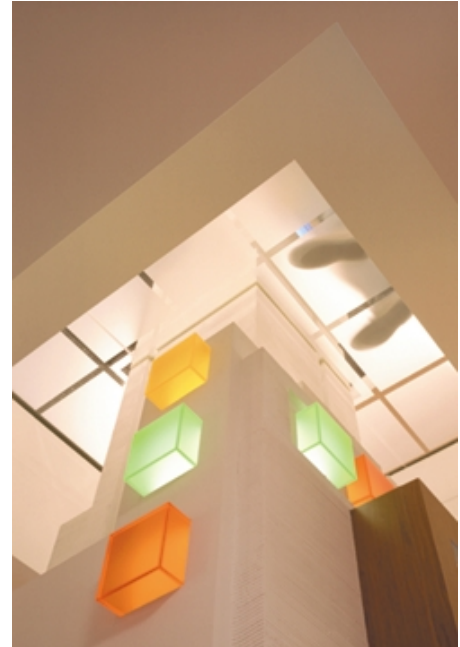
The word brand was first used over a thousand years ago, in the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, a manuscript penned in a monastery on the coast of Scotland. The word itself has an etymology linked to fire. It speaks to flame and, if we take this suggestion to heart, fire speaks to warmth. So as environmental designers, part of our responsibility is to take the message of a brand experience and extend the warmth of the expression deeper into the consciousness of the person who is experiencing this offering.

In this way, a brand becomes almost like a campfire, a community and communal experience, a center of the ancient tradition of storytelling. If we begin to play with this idea, the story is part of what we, as environmental designers, are trying to get across, aside from the fundamental information of wayfinding. We are trying to “light the way” with a deeper set of messages that speak to the consciousness of our user.

The story is a sensate experience. As listeners around the campfire – the brand – we are drawn into the realm of imagination where all our senses come into play. We **hear** the voice of the storyteller. We **feel** the warmth and the sensation of the environment. We **taste** something. There may be an element of **touch**. Certainly, there is always the sense of **scent**. As storytellers of the visible, it’s important for us to consider all the senses in the design of environments.

The word *sense* is also ancient. It’s derived from *sensus*, the Latin for perception, feeling, understanding and perhaps meaning, from the verb *sentire*, to perceive, to know, to feel. It extends to *sensate*, also likely derived from perception, to *sentient* and, of course, *sensation*...and *sensational*!

Even in the context of three-dimensional design, we find ourselves focused on the message and the skin of the treatment—conveying the basic information with a sense of style. But we may be forgetting the other levels of the *sensible* experience that could be explored. It would be worth our while to take design thinking into deeper psychic/physical spaces in the sense of touch, the implications of hearing, taste (what is the *taste* of this environment?) and scent, and finally, the enveloping experience of sight. All of us have had experiences in environments that capture something marvelous, but how often do we ponder the implication of sensing our spatial design in the context of all of the physical portals that allow us to fully experience a space and its implications?



Interpretive design, exhibits, and museums are a logical expansion on the sense-able world or storytelling. They reach to manifest a story in all the senses, such as this work for the Microsoft Museum, designed by Girvin.