

Phase 3 of the Charles River Campus signage project

14 September 2011, for the agenda item at the CAS Faculty Meeting, 21 September

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At the specific urging of a small body of Boston University alumni and students (I have not canvassed opinion) who deplore “Phase 3 of the signage project”, I requested on 26 August a meeting with President Brown, and again at their urging, am bringing the matter before the Faculty. I have also been asked by them to seek, if need be, a wider public discussion.

Proceeding exactly as advised by a secretary to President Brown, I sent an e-mail on 26 August to his Executive Assistant, Elizabeth B. Green, requesting a meeting (something that I have not hitherto done), say a quarter of an hour, and specified the matter that I wished to raise. I judged it a courtesy to give President Brown notice of my intention to promote discussion of the new signs.

As of 9 September, I had not received an acknowledgment, and I therefore re-sent the request to the Executive Assistant, adding only that the signage is an item on the agenda of the Faculty meeting of 21 September.

The immediate prompting was the new sign outside 143 Bay State Road. This might seem to be no more than one particular instance, but what has been perpetrated here is representative of current practice when it comes to Marketing in relation to the Faculty, so that more is at issue than an individual case.

Outside 143 Bay State Road, the new notice has these words, these words only, in upper and lower case, all three items in the same size:

College of
Arts & Sciences

School of Management

Undergraduate Research
Opportunities Program

What had been a handsome, ample, informative sign, in the traditional gold-on-red of Boston University, has been replaced with this small red sign with white lettering (not at all easy to read from a distance) – a sign that violates the first principle of graphic design: that there be a clear and meaningful hierarchy. The College of Arts & Sciences and the School of Management are misleadingly represented as on the same level of an information hierarchy as the subordinate Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program.

The sign is uninformative and misinformative. Misinformative, for 143 Bay State Road is not the location of either the College of Arts & Sciences or of the School of Management, let alone both of them within one house. Uninformative, in that the notice no longer lets anyone know that the Editorial Institute is at 143 Bay State Road.

The Dean of CAS has recently told us all that the new signs “list the major entities within each building”. The College of Arts & Sciences and the School of Management, however, are not *within the building*, though the sign unthinkingly puts it that they are. On the other hand, the Editorial Institute, given that it occupies two and a half floors of the building, might have been thought to qualify as an entity and even perhaps a major entity within the building: under the Graduate School, it has for more than a decade granted M.A.s and Ph.D.s in Editorial Studies, and over the years it has received \$100,000 from two Foundations as well as \$1,500,000 (a major sum in the humanities) from the Mellon Foundation.

What, please, were the criteria that were used to justify the allocation of “major entity” status? Who made these decisions? Were any of the entities or non-entities given an opportunity to make a case as to their being graded or de-graded? Were the actual occupants of any buildings ever inquired of?

There have been puzzlement and confusion for visitors from outside BU, and even for some from within BU, and the Dean of CAS found herself obliged to e-mail all the Faculty on 6 September:

In the next few days especially you will find quite a few of them [incoming undergraduate and graduate students] looking just a little lost. They might be glancing nervously back and forth from a piece of paper to a door, or staring intently at a building trying to figure out whether this is the right one, or wandering in and out of any building now labeled “CAS” or “SMG” looking for the actual buildings with those names. . . ask whether they need help. They’ll be much relieved!

And welcome to our new faculty. Some of them might be doing the same thing!

At the Editorial Institute our continuing doctoral students, like the incoming master’s and doctoral students who were at the orientation that we held on 30 August, expressed themselves not only surprised but uneasy. (What are they to make of the non-appearance/disappearance of the words “Editorial Institute”? Does this portend something like the fate of the University Professors Program?) In any case, the semester has begun with the Editorial Institute having to welcome its graduate and undergraduate students in a markedly unhelpful way. My colleagues and I are teaching several courses at 143 Bay State Road this semester, including undergraduates from many parts of the university (for instance, a Core seminar, and Literary Editing, a course in which undergraduates have enrolled). Meanwhile we

can expect visitors who will reasonably and wrongly suppose themselves to be stepping into the College of Arts & Sciences or the School of Management.

There needs to be some explaining and justifying of the ways in which these Marketing and “branding” insistences are imposed, without adequate warning and without respectful discussion with the parties who are most concerned, being concerned every single day.

The traditional signs were not locked into Marketing’s conviction that any such signs on Bay State Road must all be of the same small size. The traditional signs were at one with the buildings’ dignity of stone and brick; and because they were ample and unstinted, there was never any need for them to issue public pronouncements – divisive, invidious, and tendentious – as to which BU “entities” are entitled to being graded as “major”. Why is it wise to impose such arbitrary, unnecessary, and peremptory distinctions, dictated as they are by nothing but a wish to lessen what previously characterized the university’s history and tradition? This, in the name of what is sure to prove to be ephemeral branding since branding is ephemeral by nature. It was branding that sold us the slogan *Forging the Future* – like a check? “Cool” today, tepid tomorrow.

Whether authorities ever mean it or not, and whether they like it or not, signs are marks of power, and will always powerfully convey judgments, the more potent prejudicially in that they simply stand there, directing us, without argument. Next to 143 Bay State Road there is 141, which used to inform the passerby or indeed the visitor that, among other things, it housed the African Presidential Archives & Research Center. In the last week of August, the sign was changed to read, and only to read, this:

Administrative Offices

This information was honorable but not very helpful, being signally underdescribed, but in any case why was the sign no longer permitted to inform anybody that the building also houses (as a “major entity”, one might have thought, since it has rooms on two or three floors) the African Presidential Archives & Research Center?

One week later, the new sign has itself been annulled, with a return to the previous information (though not a return to the previous handsome gold-on-red): in the first week of September, “Administrative Offices” disappeared (though the building still includes such offices), having been in its turn replaced by this:

African Presidential
Archives & Research Center

Military Education

Major entities. The right decision, or change of decision, yes indeed, but who please was the decider and then the re-decider?

Whatever else this may be, it is not an economy. I ask myself, and have tried asking others, how much it has cost – at a time when BU has to turn down many responsible requests from the Faculty, and when it is set to launch a capital campaign – to replace with cheap-looking invidious signs the old assuredly informative unprejudicial ones. The traditional signs not only looked distinguished and distinctive, they were so. The Vice President who oversees the signs at Simmons College recently expressed her admiration of the enduring identity realized by our gold-on-red signs – “You know immediately that you are at BU”. I trust that the nearby Elie Wiesel Center for Judaic Studies is going to be allowed to retain its two full-size gold-on-red signs, and I even hope that the new UNIVERSITY HONORS COLLEGE will not have to give up its two *very* recent gold-on-red signs, likewise a few doors down from 143 Bay State Road.

Larger questions come to mind. Since the College of Fine Arts has a distinguished Graphic Design Faculty, and since it has in Alston Purvis an internationally esteemed scholar-practitioner, just what consultation was there between Marketing and all such gifted, experienced, and visually-literate colleagues of ours? None, I’d be willing to bet. Likewise as to our colleagues in the History of Art. “Consultation”, for I am not suggesting that the decision should simply have been made by our colleagues, rather that their trained experience in matters of taste, in sensibility, in visual imagination, and in sustained practice, might be held to constitute a rich resource of which the signage decision-makers would do well to inquire and even perhaps avail themselves.

“The BU signage project is an ongoing collaboration between Marketing & Communications, Facilities, Space Planning, the Provost’s Office and administrators from across the University”. Good to know, but it would be no less good to know that the university Faculty formed part of this collaboration. “My office has worked with the leaders of the project over the past year to provide assistance and perspectives from the College of Arts & Sciences”. And where does this leave those of us who are not administrators, not an office, and not leaders?

As an immediate concern, the Editorial Institute would like to be recognized by the sign on our building, but I find myself unable to act upon the prudent warnings that I have been receiving: that I really had better limit myself simply to getting our existence recognized again, there on the sign in front of the building (a building which, like many others, is now uglily scarred by the wall-marks from taking down the previous signs – which were larger and which were built to remain). But I believe that President Brown has been very ill-served by his advisers, and that the case for believing so should be made, courteously but directly.

For the present change to the signs is unreassuringly in tune with other practices that cannot but look like repudiation. The present administration has removed the Boston University seal from our stationery and from many other public manifestations of three realities that both deserve and reward our faith: our traditions, our history and our continuity. By way of contrast, spending money on “the brick” (or Lego-logo) meant a wasteful subservience to the self-assurances of Marketing, seemingly oblivious of the very opportunities that are offered not by the brand-new but by tradition, history and continuity. Dismissed as “the meat ball”, the university seal rightly values our having been founded more than 150 years ago, our pleasure and pride in the sky-lined city of Boston, and our not being embarrassed by, let alone ashamed of, a few enduring words of Latin. At Matriculation on 4 September, it was thrilling to hear Dean Patricia Johnson not only herself utter Latin but rouse the Class of 2015 to chorus, in Latin, *We will learn*. The new stationery has no place for Latin. Yet the university seal, happily figuring at the podium and in daily use on writing-paper and label and envelope and folder, has gone to the making of the 25 years of respect for Boston University that I have enjoyed.

Signs are taken for wonders, and so they should be, for it is the power not only of information but of imagination that signs have a responsibility and an opportunity to exercise. “Phase 3 of the signage project” is branding itself a failure not only of information but of imagination.