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FINDING SOLUTIONS

Raynes Rail, a true universal design, incorporates audio and touch tools for the visually impaired and the able-bodied

Text by Marilyn Zeclinsky Photography by Bill Miles

About 20 years ago, Coco Raynes was invited by the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary to design a signage system. Raynes went with her instincts and designed her idea of a way-finding system. She proposed a rail with Braille, a concept that the hospital rejected because blind people weren't treated at the infirmary. Two decades later, the patented Raynes Rail has come into its own. This year, it won a gold 1994 Industrial Design Excellence Award in an annual event juried by the Industrial Designers Society of America and sponsored by Business Week magazine. And, the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary came around in 1993, when it enthusiastically installed the first Raynes Rail on the ninth floor of its facility, and has plans to install the system throughout the hospital. The Raynes Rail is a Braille way-finding handrail system which allows blind visitors to direct themselves—with dignity—throughout unknown corridors and open spaces without another's assistance. The Braille messages are located on the rail's inner face, and audio information can be accessed at strategic locations, as well—a tool which sighted individuals might also deeply appreciate. **Raynes, who developed the rail years before the ADA came into existence**, says a handrail has numerous advantages over typical wall signage, and, it costs only about 10 to 20 percent more than ordinary handrails.

“The ADA says that signage has to be five feet from the ground on the right side of a door,” she says. “But it's ludicrous and unfair to ask a blind person to feel the wall to find the sign. Groping in the dark won't help someone—it's insulting, embarrassing, and oftentimes, a blind person accidentally knocks into sconces and art work.” Clearly, the Raynes Rail is a graceful solution. It provides a continuous link of security for users, it can carry numerous messages, it's positioned at a natural height for the hand to rest on. It can be aesthetically integrated into any interior's design, it is discrete and doesn't disturb anyone who isn't using the rail. The only two problems Raynes has encountered since installation is the chewing 'gum stuck behind the rail and the fact that field conditions may differ from actual floor plans which means that the system has to be double-checked to adjust messages to match actual layout. “When designers are asked to use Braille on a project, they think that they have to use institutional-looking signage and systems,” says Raynes. “But the ADA has now prompted the design industry to think in new ways to find alternatives out there to fulfill these requirements.” The Raynes Rail is one elegant answer that took 20 years to find its well-deserved acceptance.

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Raynes relied on Braille consultants, including the woman pictured at left, from the Newton, Massachusetts-based Carroll Center for the blind to test the rail and to help design a vocabulary for braille readers. The system is designed for quick reading. “To prevent disorientation, we use ‘opposite’ and never ‘right’ or ‘left’”, says Raynes. “We use ‘hall’ and not ‘corridor’ because it’s a faster read.” Below: The Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary installed this wood version, which is shown here from the back of the rail. “I knew where I was... It is almost like seeing again,” said Charles Crawford, commissioner of the Massachusetts Commission of the Blind, when he tested the system at the hospital.



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