The IKEA Shopping Experience
Clark MacLeod

The following is a short analysis of the experience of shopping at IKEA, a well-known department store, from the perspective of an information architect or information designer. There is a lot to be learned from doing even a cursory analysis such as this towards general and web centered way finding applications.

Summary

The stores are very well designed and provide a rather unique experience.

One of the most amazing aspects of shopping at IKEA is that fact that their stores are generally all the same. With the exception of some language and product localization the store in Taipei is almost the same as the store I used to shop in Yorkville Ontario. This is rather interesting to me because upon arrival in Taipei 4 years ago I was able to decorate my apartment much as it was when I was living in Nova Scotia. Familiarity makes shopping at any of their stores as easy as the other.

One thing which really struck me about shopping at IKEA is that you can only move in one direction. Arrows on the floor and signs at critical junctures indicate that you're moving through the store in a planned, straightforward manner. Don’t try to go in the opposite of the prescribed fashion – evil looks and possible shopping cart accidents await. This doesn't really work for me as I can never make up my mind about a purchase until I am at the other end of the store.

At the Taipei store you start shopping at the B2 level. If you are lucky there are not a lot of people shopping at the same time as you may find yourself part of a herd. Much like cattle being directed by a farmer. As you progress through the first floor you will realize that their merchandise is laid out in context -- Living room, Dining room, Kitchens, Home office—If you are interested in place mats, lamps, tables, chairs, cupboards, spoons etc. you will find expertly arranged where you might expect to find them.

But, if you're looking for a specific thing or you don’t know what you are looking for -- you need to go upstairs to B1. The first level is for those who know what they're looking for while the second level is for those not entirely certain what they're looking for...two key methods of information retrieval.
IKEA IA – Broad Categories

Other organization schemes include product and designer names. Now perhaps product type may seem an obvious method of organizing their merchandise, being able to match all my shelving in Canada was helped with the knowledge that it was all IVAR but who cares about the designer of a plastic bucket or even a chair. Well while shopping for a chair I had been searching for a styles similar to the one that I had bought earlier, and realized that it was designed by Noboru Nakamura. I now own two. This is of course quite similar to how clothing department stores organize their stock, e.g., Ralph Lauren, Armani, Polo.

IKEA IA - Other Categories

All areas throughout the store are clearly labeled, from the big bold category signage down to the product or designer names. The route is straight forward and you are given plenty of arrows to show in which direction you should or should not be going. As well, there are maps located throughout the store (which offer help). If after all this you still need help there are generally helpful multilingual staff ready to take your money.

Up stairs more closely resembles a regular department store with bins after bins of product arranged by product type – ex.: pictures & frames, lighting, interior, and gift shop. This area allows for more freedom of movement and the ability to browse across product categories but the end direction is still the same.
It’s at this point that you realize in what direction that they are ultimately taking you to – the checkout!

**Application**

What part of shopping at IKEA would be considered a quality experience and how can it be applied to websites?

- Their stores generally all work the same way.
  By relying on “external context” we can reduce the learning curve for our interfaces. If our websites share similar structures with other sites with similar goals than users will have a greater chance of knowing where to find the things they are looking for, thereby improving navigation.
- Arrows and signage.
  Answers the questions that users have when navigating websites – where am I?; Where can I go?; How will I get there?.
- Clear large labels.
  Good labels are an important part of communication. Ikea uses labels that clearly speak to the intended audience. This is even more important on the web as there is no one around to help you find things.
- Help in the form of maps, telephones, and people.
  While we are not as literally able to provide these services on a website (generally) we can provide help, guidance and feedback. This is especially pronounced when a user is trying to complete a task that is prone to errors – ie. Filling out questionnaires, completing a purchase.
- Support for different types of information retrieval needs.
  Ikea supports known-item (“I know what I’m looking for”) and open-ended (“I’m not sure what I’m looking for”). Different parts of the store are arranged to support these two types of information (or, in this case, furniture) needs. Taking into account the numbers of different information “seeking” methods and styles that your users may employ will increase the likely hood of a navigable site.
- Categories that take into account users needs.
  Organizing your content in the multitude of ways that your user may envision them being in.
- Embracing freedom of movement is better than a linear path ... on the web.
  The forced path that one must follow at Ikea would certainly not work in most cases on the web. One exception would be e-commerce web site’s shopping cart check outs.

**Pictures**

(These can also be viewed in full color at http://www.kelake.org/projects/ikea)