

LONDON UNDERGROUND'S INFLUENCE ON THE NEW YORK SUBWAY MAP

by Peter B. Lloyd

**A Report of the LURS meeting at All Souls Club House
on Tuesday 13 August 2013**

Peter started by stating that has no connection with Transport for London or the New York Transport Authorities. He is a collector of maps and has recently written a book on the subject.

Harry Beck's concept of a diagrammatic map is not universally used – no matter what the plaque at Finchley Central may say!

HISTORY OF TRANSPORT MAPS

The first London maps were geographic maps showing the street plan with the Underground lines overprinted in red and blue. In 1908 colour coding of lines was introduced. From 1910 the streets were removed and instead landmarks and places of interest were drawn on.

In 1933 Harry Beck produced his first diagram applying a systematic approach to displaying complex information. He worked on the principles of uniform spacing and labelling, harmonisation and simplicity.

NEW YORK

In 1875 the first discussions for a subway system in New York were held; but it was not until 1897 that the Rapid Transit Commission of New York issued the first formal description of an underground system for New York City [NYC]. Again the first map was geographical with the rail lines overprinted in red (for cut and cover lines) and blue (for elevated lines). A major difference between the NYC and London systems is that NYC has many express and stopping services running adjacent to each other – therefore, the early maps even showed the number of tracks in each direction to indicate where the express trains stopped as well as the local services. In 1918 the map was reprinted and stops on the express lines were indicated by black circles (●) and those on the local lines by black dots (•).

From the 1910s there were two companies operating services in NYC (BMT and IRT), both trying to expand the system in their own specific areas of the City; but not that interested in encouraging customers – shown by the lack of pocket sized maps being issued during this period.

When John F. Hylan was elected Mayor he expressed his anger at the behaviour of these two companies and created a new city owned transit system – the IND. As a result of this, the two companies did increase their publication of customer-friendly maps to encourage passengers and to placate the Mayor. However there were still two maps (one BMT and one IRT) in two different styles and showing no influence from the London map. The IND never distributed maps itself; instead it came to an agreement with the local telecoms company for a map to be included in the directory which was given to every household.

From the 1930s colour coding of lines was introduced; but on some maps shading was used instead.

In 1940, the NYC subway system was unified following financial crises partially caused by increased competition from buses, but mainly from a fare regulation scheme which prevented the subway companies from making any increases! The old maps for the two different companies continued to be displayed until about 1942.

During the 1940s and 50s: Andrew Hagstrom, a cartographer working in New York was drawing maps including the subways of all three companies and after amalgamation these started to be used as the main maps. This was still a geographic map with lots of arrows indicating station sites.

George Salomon, a student of Eric Gill, in 1955 proposed a new map and had this accepted by the New York Transit Authority. This was based upon Beck's diagram although it had much wider curves than Beck's and was much more linear with interchanges indicated by light grey boxes. Salomon's diagram was in use from 1958 until the late 1960s. Like Beck, Salomon was only contracted to produce an initial design and then future alterations were done "in-house".

A major rebuilding project on the system in the mid-60s had led to the old maps becoming incorrect and so a competition was held in 1964 for a new map. This was awarded to D'Adamo and Goldstein

with their colour coded map. However, this coding was not replicated on the trains and the map was very congested with line numbers and dotted lines and so not very user-friendly – it was even described as “chaos”!

By the early 1970s all public transport in New York had become the responsibility of the Metropolitan Transit Authority [MTA] under the chairmanship of William Ronan. The general negativity around Goldstein’s map led to the Authority contacting Unimark International design agency and asking them to produce a new map. In 1972 this was introduced and has become probably the most famous and recognisable of the NYC maps. It was designed by Massimo Vignelli, an Italian born student of the New Bauhaus School in Chicago (which grew out of the pre-war German Bauhaus Movement) and the Modernist movements. His style was based upon simplification and minimal detail, including nothing that doesn’t serve a purpose or promoting harmony and beauty. Vignelli had been a co-founder of Unimark International in the mid-1960s and been involved in designing logos for many companies, and signage for the subway system.

Vignelli’s map has been hailed as a design classic but in 1979 it was removed from the subway system on the claim that it was “too abstract” and, the marketing department said, not useful for promoting New York to tourists. Another disadvantage of Vignelli’s map is that it did not show where a station was in relation to the area above it. New York in the 1970s had some areas of high deprivation and crime and so getting out in a “bad area” could be the last thing you did!

In 1975 a committee under the chairmanship of John Tauranac looks for a replacement for Vignelli’s map. Tauranac loved Beck’s map but not its abstractness and asks for a map drawn as accurately as possible (no need for a systematic approach) with geographic bias and icons from Beck’s diagram. This led to a very idiosyncratic map, with the complete opposite ideology to Vignelli’s.

In 2008, Mark Rozzo the editor of Men’s Vogue and a fan of Vignelli and the Modernist movement asked him to produce a special edition of his NYC diagram. This was duly published and all copies sold out within 24 hours. Following this success, the MTA readopted Vignelli’s map in 2011 but with its separate lines showing weekend engineering works. Its long-term future is, as yet, unclear.

A period of Q&A followed including whether Vignelli intended to bring Beck’s diagram to New York? Peter replied that Vignelli’s design principles were always to start from a blank canvas but it is known that Vignelli highly respected Beck but there was no implicit copying. Also asked was whether the complexity of the NYC system prevents a schematic map of the London type? Peter replied that it is not necessarily that a diagrammatic map would not work, just that it would be much more complicated than London’s.

The meeting then thanked Mr. Lloyd in the usual manner.

Amanda Day

Copies of Mr. Lloyd’s book, “Vignelli: Transit Maps” can be bought at the London Transport Museum shop.