

TUBE ♦ MAP ♦ CENTRAL

Newsletter, June 2014

Massimo Vignelli, 1931 – 2014

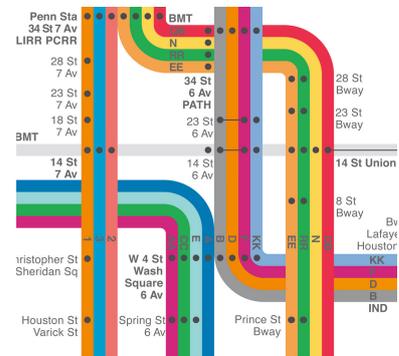


With a Vignelliano theme to my last two newsletters, it was with great sadness that I learned of the death of Massimo Vignelli on Tuesday 27th May, 2014. I never had the privilege of meeting him, but we exchanged occasional cordial emails. I will not be writing an obituary here: many people more qualified to pen one have done so already. Vignelli's output and influence was vast, but this is a newsletter about transit map research and design, and so it seems appropriate to pause and reflect on one of the few diagrammatic maps in which both design and designer have been immortalised, albeit for controversial reasons. This newsletter is dedicated to their memory.

Massimo Vignelli, taken in 2010 at the dedication of the Vignelli Centre for Design Studies at the Rochester Institute of Technology. Photograph courtesy of R. Roger Remington, reproduced with permission.

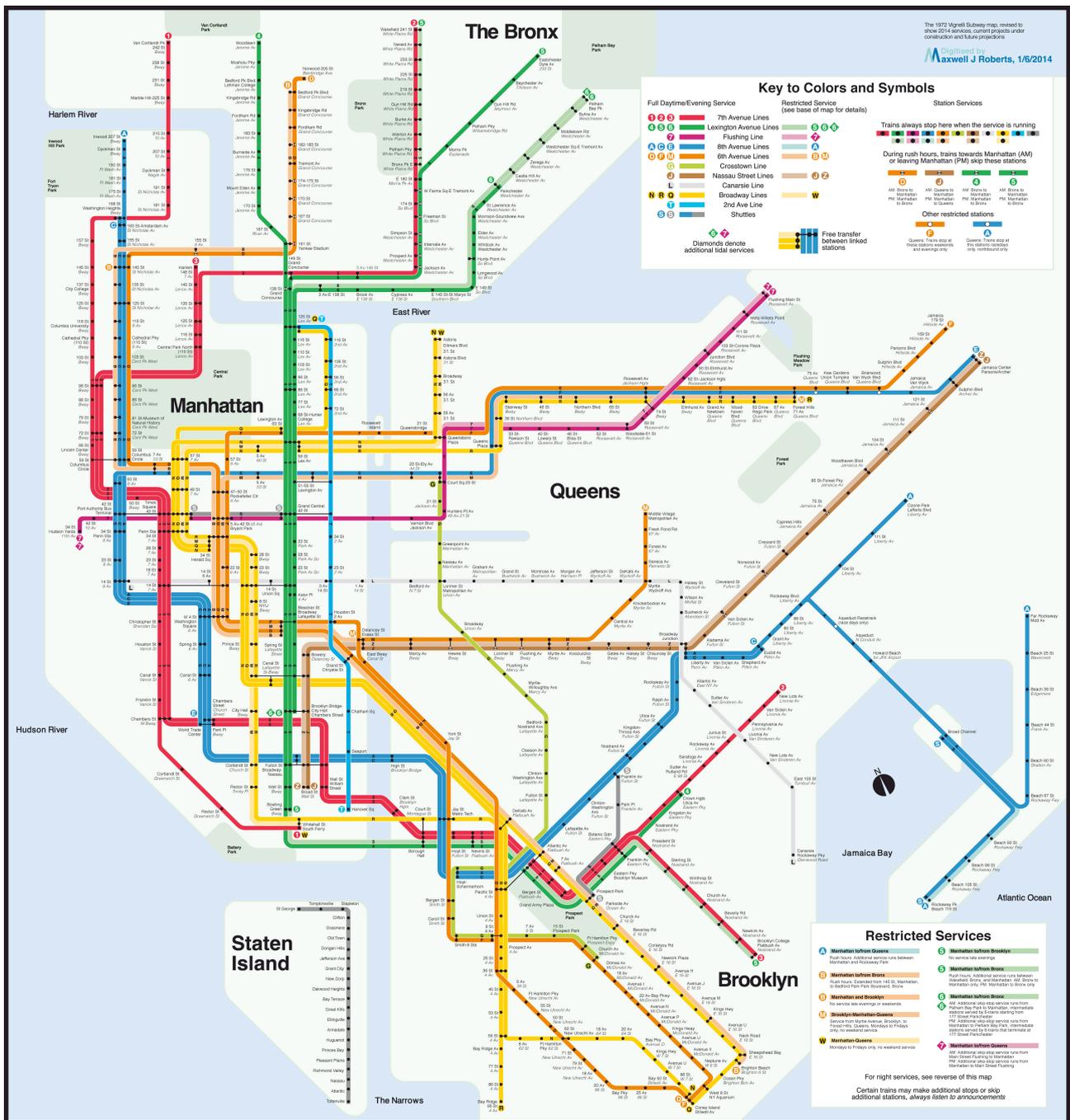
Map of the month: A misunderstood design

[The story of Vignelli's New York City Subway map](#) has been ably told by [Peter Lloyd](#) (who is currently working on a sequel, describing the map's assassination). The first version was published in 1972 and has always polarised people. Although acclaimed as an outstanding example of modernist design, its abstractness and disconnection from geographical reality led to complaints, and these are the reasons often cited for its early demise (in 1979). In reality, Vignelli had envisaged the diagram to be one component of a complete wayfinding scheme, with geographical maps, neighbourhood maps, and revamped station signage all part of the package. By cherry-picking just a few elements of his proposals, the New York City Transit Authority opened the door to future turmoil.



My own suspicion, [discussed in my book](#), is that the original design suffered from the line colour-coding scheme that it had inherited. The alleged problems with geographical accuracy are not that serious, and easily fixed. In contrast, one colour for each individual subway route led to a design that was imposing but incoherent, with the random stripes concealing the structure of the network, hiding the relationships of the subways between Manhattan and the outer boroughs. Add to that the considerably complex services of 1972, with rush-hour augmentations, weekend service-cuts, and stations whose trains varied by time of day and direction of travel, and we have a concept that was possibly ahead of its time. An orderly map cannot fix a disorganised network. Today, the colour-coding is much more coherent, and the service patterns are considerably easier to comprehend. Perhaps vindicating this assessment, a considerably revised version of Vignelli's original has now been adopted by the New York Metropolitan Transit Authority to show weekend service disruptions, hence its new name, the [Weekender](#) map.

The *Weekender* takes a more pragmatic approach to design than previously, but is considerably larger as a result, and I must confess that my own opinion is that it has lost a lot of the power of the original. This is where my digitisation and design experiments come to the rescue, and some readers will know that I have already realised Vignelli's original work as vector graphics, and modified this to show the simplified colour scheme that its geographical successor adopted in 1979. The detractors of Vignelli's map never attempted to apply this to see whether it could be salvaged, such was their dislike of the concept of a diagrammatic map. Personally, I advocate that every network should have two outstanding maps: geographical (to show where the network is) and a simplified diagram (to show how the components of the network relate to each other). Definitely not a hybrid, performing neither function well.



Digitising a hand-drawn map is an exercise that all people should attempt if they are serious about designing maps. A huge amount about the original can be learnt, and this is also excellent at training the eye to see details accurately. In the case of Vignelli's diagram, the realisation in vector graphics made me appreciate the sheer orderliness of the original: one of the most carefully crafted designs that I have ever encountered, with every detail applied with precision. What I did not attempt, but have now completed here, is a version faithful to the original but that incorporates the current New York Subway services, along with the various future schemes currently under construction or discussion.

1972 was a bad year for the New York subway. Not only was an ill-fated map published, but construction commenced on the 2nd Avenue Subway. Designers would surely have been thinking about how the new subway line might appear on the new map. Unfortunately, the subsequent city financial crisis led to the abandonment of construction, which did not recommence until 2007. If the original Vignelli diagram had been kept in production, might it have looked like this? We can never know for sure; too much guesswork has been required in the process of updating it, but what is clear is that the original was sufficiently well-conceived for it to withstand this level of tampering without looking unbalanced or contrived.

Normal services will be resumed for the July newsletter, in which I will be plumbing the depths of bad information design, or will I? You can subscribe to this at my web pages www.tubemapcentral.com.

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