

TUBE ♦ MAP ♦ CENTRAL

Newsletter, July 2014

Welcome to my July 2014 newsletter. Some catching up to do this month after my previous one, and plenty to talk about for *map of the month*. Thanks to everyone who said hello to me at the [Illustrators Fair](#) at Kings Cross, it was a very enjoyable day.

Web Page News

After nine newsletters completed, I have realised that the *maps of the month* are disappearing into the aether. Newsletters are now properly archived [here](#), and you can download each *map of the month* directly as a high-resolution jpeg.

On the web

- With the death of Massimo Vignelli in May, [Next City](#) offered us [7 Alternate Versions of the New York City Subway Map](#); one of them is my own New York circles design.
- My London [circles map](#) continues to pop up here and there. Here is a mention from [Tom Candy](#) and a nice article from [Hospital Records](#) explaining how the design was [adapted to publicise their music events](#).
- Two articles in French: one at [Demain la Ville](#) and another at [Espaces Temps](#).
- My Design Museum presentation from last year got [Rachel Davies](#) at [Agile Coaching](#) thinking. The result is an [article about software design](#).

Dates for your diary

On Thursday 10th July, I am scheduled for a studio discussion with [Hans-Ulrich Obrist](#) on the topic of maps versus diagrams on the BBC Radio 4 *Today* program. He has recently published a compilation of explorations: [Mapping it Out](#). I don't yet have a scheduled time, but it is most likely to be in the last thirty minutes of the program, before 09:00. BBC radio programs can be accessed [online](#).

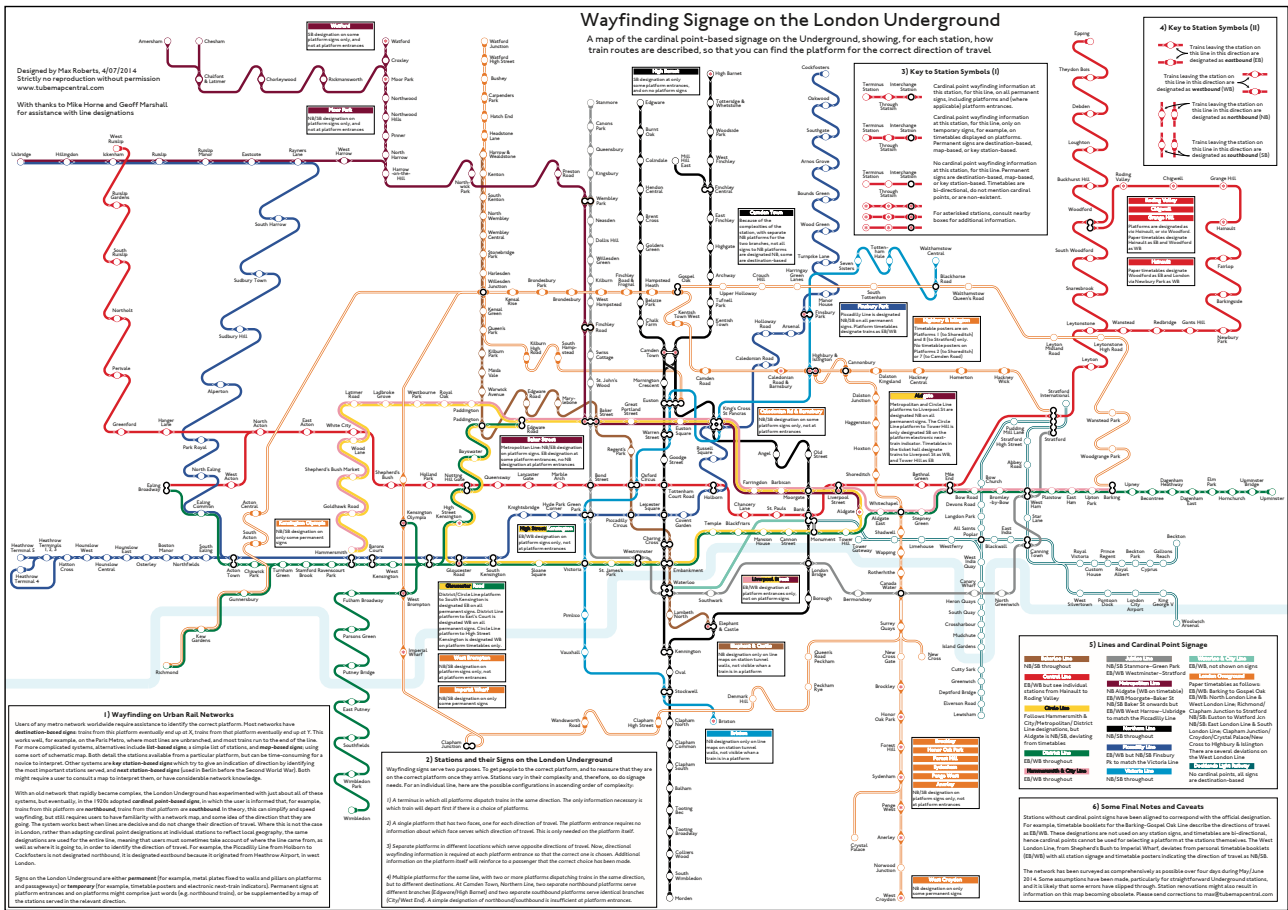
Map research

- The internet survey on map design is still live. So far, 240 people have taken part, and you can access it at www.tubemapcentral.com/survey. It takes around 15 minutes to complete, and I still need many more people to respond to get the best possible data. All are welcome, even (especially?) map-phobics.
- Another student project has commenced, looking at people's general aesthetic preferences for shape, their cognitive ability, and journey planning performance and usability ratings for three different Berlin U- and S-Bahn maps. It should provide an interesting comparison with the internet survey. I will report back on the outcomes of this year's student projects in September.

Map of the month: It seemed like a good idea at the time. It always does

Why can't designers add this information to the map, it would be so easy for them to do it, and it would be so useful? All map designers find themselves at the wrong end of this question from time to time. People who make such requests rarely stop and think about whether their suggestions might be impractical, with hidden complexities that derail the idea outright, or damage the appearance of the design so much that it ceases to be usable. Interchange quality is a frequent request for the London Underground map. Some transfers between lines involve a short walk across a platform, others a lengthy hike of several hundred yards, so this feature is undoubtedly potentially useful. The clue, therefore, assuming that designers are clever, resourceful people, is that this is almost impossible, otherwise such information would have been added years ago. There are so many complications to including these details on a simple, small paper map that it would cease to be simple and small, and the result would be an unusable mess.

I can illustrate this with an even simpler example. TfL recently created and published an [Underground map](#) that indicates which stations are equipped with toilets. Four symbols, in two colours, applied to around 120 stations. Is the station equipped or not, what are the facilities, is a ticket needed to access them? But is even this really that simple? Well ... Are the toilets available for the full working day, or do they close early, and if so, at what times? Are they free? In a complicated station with several exits, where are they located? Are they genuinely available, or does a grumpy station manager keep them locked because he/she can't be



bothered to walk to the end of the platform to check them at regular intervals? Does it matter whether the toilets are actually within the station? If there are facilities nearby, should they also be flagged and, if so, where are they, when do they open, and are they free? You get the idea, nothing is simple in real life.

At the recent [Schematic Mapping workshop](#), I was discussing various wayfinding issues with a colleague. In particular the system that the London Underground uses to direct people to station platforms; designating them as northbound/southbound/eastbound/westbound. We knew that there were complexities and anomalies, so would a map showing this information be feasible and useful? This was an interesting idea for me for three reasons. First, as an intellectual challenge. Second, as a nice demonstration of how an apparently simple information design concept can collapse under its own weight. And third, having heard London Underground staff declare on several occasions that Underground signage is the best in the world, just how consistent and intuitive is this key navigational information on the ground?

Not surprisingly, the outcome is a bit of a monstrosity. The wiggly lines are a result of a design decision to make the line trajectories themselves follow the compass point designations: thus they completely match the station symbols, and this also makes interchanges much neater. They also highlight areas where local geography conflicts with the line designations. The map shows that methods of assisting passengers in finding the right platform are not particularly consistently applied across the TfL rail network, but the utility (for planning a journey) of providing this information is so low that the costs of applying it practically destroy any of the benefits of having a map. Note the quantity of text required to explain what the map is showing. If your idea for assisting people needs this much supplementary information in order for them to make sense of it, then the chances are that this innovation is not making their lives easier.

A map that shows how compass-point directional information is used to assist people in navigating Underground stations? That sounded like a great idea didn't it?

For the map of the month in the August newsletter, I will be returning to New York to have another attempt at deconstructing Massimo Vignelli's design icon. You can subscribe to this at my web pages www.tubemapcentral.com.

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