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Communication Design Theory OL69

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### Massimo Vignelli: The Subway Map

One of the most notable designs of our time was created by a man named Massimo Vignelli. It's one that we see everyday yet we don't acknowledge at all. That being the New York City Subway Diagram. This is probably one of his most famous pieces he's ever done to date. This design shows the use of the famous Helvetica typeface and the iconic colors of the New York subway system. He was praised for its simple and legible design because prior to this design, the subway map was very confusing and illegible. Massimo Vignelli's style was heavily inspired by modernism and it's almost avant garde in a way. It's so simplified, constructive, and clean.

Massimo Vignelli takes influence from the avant-garde movement and modernism. His work is not only limited to subway maps but he has also designed countless pieces of furniture and clothing. You can see the avant-garde and modernism movements across all of his work. The subway map is sort've a direct response to that new age of modernism and the avant-garde. In the reading *Graphic Design Theory* by Helen Armstrong it states, "Few members of the general public are aware, for example, of the intense waves of feeling triggered among designers by the typeface Helvetica, generation after generation, yet nearly anyone living in a literate, urbanized

part of the world has seen this typeface or characters inspired by it.” Massimo Vignelli was one of those designers heavily influenced by the Helvetica typeface. It is used in the New York City Subway Diagram. It’s clear, it’s legible, and it’s clean. It’s one of those typefaces that everyone can read and understand immediately. Keeping it simple is one way in making things effective in design. Just like the simplicity of the avant-garde movement. Avant-garde started out as a traditional medium of realistic portraits and landscapes. But as time moved on so did the art. It formed itself into expressionism, later into cubism and lastly collage art which can be seen in Cubism and Dadaism. These art forms are what influenced avant-gardes simplicity. Graphic design was able to be formed by the avant-garde movements which allowed us to get this striking subway map design. You can see in the subway map that it’s very direct and it’s something you can visually understand. There’s no confusion and no second guessing with this piece.

The language of graphic design is one of the most powerful forms of language. Being able to communicate visually rather than linguistically can sometimes be stronger than just communicating regularly. You don't need to know English to understand this subway map design. You just need to have eyes and look. Design allows people to have a universal language without even saying anything to each other. And that’s exactly what this subway map design does. One of the problems with the older subway map designs was the people couldn't relate the train routes and stations with the geography of the state. It confused people, me included. Massimo Vignelli took that old design and turned it into something abstract and not literal as it was before. With this abstraction many subway goers were able to understand this subway system map quicker and easier. It states in the reading *Course In General Linguistics* that, “Signs that are wholly arbitrary realize better than the others the ideal of the semiological process; that

is why language, the most complex and universal of all systems of expression, is also the most characteristic...” Massimo was able to speed up the comprehension of signage and diagrams by providing the most minimal amount of information that this design needed. Language is very characteristic and it’s shown in this piece because of how straightforward and legible it is. It communicates to the viewer which routes to take and where they are going. It doesn't necessarily have to be in the same language because the subway map design is expressing itself visually. Symbols make up the whole subway system and Massimo Vignelli took those symbols and abstracted them so they were easier for the average person to understand.

Overall the New York City Subway Diagram created by Massimo Vignelli embodies the avant-garde and modernist movements. It’s able to visually communicate with the viewer because of its bold colors and simplistic design. Massimo Vignelli was able to take something so complex like the train system and turn it into something so simple instead of so literal. Just like the avant-garde artists did with their art. Creating something simple is most effective when it comes to communicating to a person and therefore everyone is able to understand. Almost as if they were speaking the same language. The language of design.

# New York City Subway Diagram

# 2008

**New York City Subway Diagram**  
This diagram represents the New York City Subway system, showing the routes and stations of the various lines. The diagram is color-coded by line, and the stations are marked with their respective line colors. The diagram is a simplified representation of the actual subway system, and does not show the physical layout of the tracks or the terrain of the city.

- Line Symbols**  
The diagram uses the following symbols to represent different types of lines:
  - Blue line**: Express service
  - Red line**: Local service
  - Green line**: Local service
  - Orange line**: Local service
  - Yellow line**: Local service
  - Light blue line**: Local service
  - Light green line**: Local service
  - Light orange line**: Local service
  - Light yellow line**: Local service
  - Light purple line**: Local service
  - Light brown line**: Local service
  - Light pink line**: Local service
  - Light grey line**: Local service
  - Light blue-grey line**: Local service
  - Light green-grey line**: Local service
  - Light orange-grey line**: Local service
  - Light yellow-grey line**: Local service
  - Light purple-grey line**: Local service
  - Light brown-grey line**: Local service
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  - Light purple-grey-grey line**: Local service
  - Light brown-grey-grey line**: Local service
  - Light pink-grey-grey line**: Local service
  - Light grey-grey-grey line**: Local service
- Station Symbols**  
The diagram uses the following symbols to represent different types of stations:
  - Circle**: Express station
  - Square**: Local station
  - Triangle**: Transfer station
  - Star**: Transfer station
  - Hexagon**: Transfer station
  - Octagon**: Transfer station
  - Circle with cross**: Transfer station
  - Square with cross**: Transfer station
  - Triangle with cross**: Transfer station
  - Star with cross**: Transfer station
  - Hexagon with cross**: Transfer station
  - Octagon with cross**: Transfer station
  - Circle with cross and dot**: Transfer station
  - Square with cross and dot**: Transfer station
  - Triangle with cross and dot**: Transfer station
  - Star with cross and dot**: Transfer station
  - Hexagon with cross and dot**: Transfer station
  - Octagon with cross and dot**: Transfer station
- Transfer Station**  
The diagram uses the following symbols to represent different types of transfer stations:
  - Circle**: Transfer station
  - Square**: Transfer station
  - Triangle**: Transfer station
  - Star**: Transfer station
  - Hexagon**: Transfer station
  - Octagon**: Transfer station
  - Circle with cross**: Transfer station
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- A** **IRT Broadway–Seventh Avenue Line** (Red Line)
- B** **IRT Broadway–Seventh Avenue Line** (Red Line)
- C** **IRT Broadway–Seventh Avenue Line** (Red Line)
- D** **IRT Broadway–Seventh Avenue Line** (Red Line)
- E** **IRT Broadway–Seventh Avenue Line** (Red Line)
- F** **IRT Broadway–Seventh Avenue Line** (Red Line)
- G** **IRT Broadway–Seventh Avenue Line** (Red Line)
- H** **IRT Broadway–Seventh Avenue Line** (Red Line)
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- R** **IRT Broadway–Seventh Avenue Line** (Red Line)
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- W** **IRT Broadway–Seventh Avenue Line** (Red Line)
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- R** **IRT Broadway–Seventh Avenue Line** (Red Line)
- L** **IRT Broadway–Seventh Avenue Line** (Red Line)
- J** **IRT Broadway–Seventh Avenue Line** (Red Line)
- Z** **IRT Broadway–Seventh Avenue Line** (Red Line)
- M** **IRT Broadway–Seventh Avenue Line** (Red Line)
- S** **IRT Broadway–Seventh Avenue Line** (Red Line)

- 1** **IRT Broadway–Seventh Avenue Line** (Red Line)
- 2** **IRT Broadway–Seventh Avenue Line** (Red Line)
- 3** **IRT Broadway–Seventh Avenue Line** (Red Line)
- 4** **IRT Broadway–Seventh Avenue Line** (Red Line)
- 5** **IRT Broadway–Seventh Avenue Line** (Red Line)
- 6** **IRT Broadway–Seventh Avenue Line** (Red Line)
- 7** **IRT Broadway–Seventh Avenue Line** (Red Line)
- 8** **IRT Broadway–Seventh Avenue Line** (Red Line)
- 9** **IRT Broadway–Seventh Avenue Line** (Red Line)
- 10** **IRT Broadway–Seventh Avenue Line** (Red Line)



*Sources*

*Course in General Linguistics* by Ferdinand De Saussure edited by Charles Bally and Albert  
Reidlinger

*Graphic Design Theory: Readings From The Field* by Helen Armstrong