

New York City is a pretty big place. Millions travel daily through and between the five boroughs. With this many people, it's important to have multiple navigational signs present so pedestrians know where they are and where they are going. You can still get lost in the streets of New York but imagine traveling through the train system before the 1970s. The signage for the metro looked and felt cluttered. The signs were completely filled with type with too much information and weird leading, making the signs lack readability. In the early 70s, Massimo Vignelli and other designers' changes this by bringing order to the designs.

Massimo Vignelli an Italian designer. According to Wikipedia, he worked on "packaging, houseware, furniture, public signage and showroom design." In 1972, Vignelli and Bob Noorda created a visual design system for the New York City subway and that led up to the object of this writing, the "New York City Subway Diagram" (1972). With Vignelli and Noorda's formula everything is layout like blocks and leave room to breathe with the use of negative space. For example, the train lines contained vertical, horizontal and diagonals that are spread a little far apart. This allowed room to include very few words on this map to be always horizontal. The diagram has consistency and makes sure all the words are very readable and leadable. Symbols with color were used as well to visually coordinate the color of the train lines. All of these elements add up to a system that values function over artistic appeal.

The creation of this diagram works alongside the new design system instead of against it. It's all about the consistency and simplicity of how the information is presented and that is what can

make a design universal. For the geographic style, he used simple geometric shapes to represent the boroughs. For example, Manhattan is stubby and much wider, and the parks are mostly square blobs. A design choice like this helps improve the readability of the information.

You may be wondering what inspired Vignelli to use this style. Well, the style is called International Typographic Style/ Swiss School. It is style from an art school in Switzerland. They carried the ideal of function in their designs. The characteristics you'll find are simplified geometric shapes and layout and the use of the Sans Serif typeface, specifically Helvetica. The presentation of information takes priority however you'll still see the use of imagery working in harmony with their type. With these traits designer such as Josef Muller- Brockmann and Armin Hofmann strived for their design to be universally understood by a public audience.

When Vignelli designed diagram, I think he was responding to the modernism movement by embracing it and try to incorporate into everything the public see and will use. People starts to change the way they think when navigating the system. Even without the use of language people can still get a "conscious response" by having the most important information eye catching.

Looking at the map first glance, the most important information to Vignelli focus on are the boroughs and the color codes train lines. The font Standard CT Medium also helped make the typeface a little easier to read with a glance. Vignelli values the information of the map however I think where he failed was to see the value of understanding the people of New York.

The 1972 New York City Subway Diagram was discontinued in 1979 and was replaced by Michael Hertz's version of the subway map. Vignelli's diagram was short lived because the backlash from the public. Hertz was still influenced by Vignelli use of colors for the train lines and include it in his version.

The primary problem that was complained about was the how abstract the geographical layout is. Like mentioned before the shape of the boroughs were very blocky and not accurate to reality. There is also the lack of information of the streets above. However everywhere else that changes their subway maps to simplified diagrams turned out as a success, so it can be a head scratcher on why this map didn't work. It did almost everything Gyorgy Kepes recommend for a "visual experience." It had organized visuals, prioritized clear information, and worked with the system that was being placed. Then I thought it was possible that the map fails to understand it's audience. Before subway maps were more topographically so people were accustomed to the traditional maps. The NYC subway is very complex for a long time now but the accuracy of the geographical layout is always stayed consistent and provided safety and confidence on where they need to go in relation to the surface. In terms of design, there was not really anything wrong with Vignelli's design, it just needed to understand it's audience's needs. Luckily, Vignelli's diagram lived on as NYC's weekender map in 2012.

Sources

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