Tube Map Central

Monthly Newsletter

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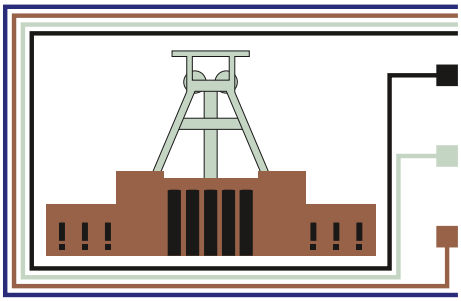
It is with sadness but also a sense of achievement that I announce that the 100th Tube Map Central newsletter will be the final monthly edition. I've decided that it is time to refocus how I express my curiosity and creativity and, although compiling the newsletter and the replies it generates from readers gives me great pleasure, it also takes up a lot of time. Rest assured that I will always be interested in maps. I will continue to design them, research into their history and usability, write about them, and update my web pages, but I also intend to explore new directions too.

I will be keeping a mailing list, ***BUT THIS WILL BE NEWLY-COMPILED AND STRICTLY OPT-IN***. If you wish to continue to receive occasional, irregular emails from me, which might include details of public lectures, latest research publications, books and other merchandise, or interesting new maps, then you must email me to let me know. No email, no more mailings from Tube Map Central.



Date for your diary

The third Schematic Mapping Workshop will take place on 21st to 22nd April 2022 at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum. Submissions are now closed and we have plenty of papers to review. Once this process is complete we will publish the program. Check the workshop website for forthcoming details on registration and attendance, and email any questions to us at the workshop address.

Map of the Month: New York City from First Principles

Eighteen months ago, Peter Lloyd announced that he had discovered that, in 1951, Henry Beck had written to the New York City Transit Authority requesting a copy of their system map. The version that Beck would have received was a colourful topographical design created by Hagstrom and adopted by the Subway as their official map. It did not do much to assist the user in deciphering the services, and one can only imagine how daunting it would have appeared on first viewing. However, Beck was no stranger to mapping complexity: his 1938 all-London railways map included the Southern Electric network, possibly the most fiendish in the world, so he should not have been deterred.

Unfortunately, there seems to be no surviving sketches from any attempts by Beck to create a design, but we can still ask what sort of map might he have devised? Like his Paris drawings, it would almost certainly have been octolinear and, in common with all of his other work, it would have been unlikely to have shown service patterns, so the unfathomable New York City mesh need not have deterred him. It is far harder to decide what his other priorities might have been. Before the Second World War, his maps reflected an attempt at maintaining spatial informativeness in terms of relative positioning of lines and stations. After the war, topographical fidelity seemed to matter less for Beck. His final London design was very distorted, even more so for his Paris work and, therefore, we might expect something similarly deformed had Beck attempted the New York City Subway in the 1950s.

This causes me problems in considering how to devise a Beck style map. My personal opinion is that that his final London design was not a success, and his Paris attempt was a disaster. I did not want put effort into creating something that I did not believe in, so I tried a different strategy. I focused on the Hagstrom map itself and asked myself: *what is this map trying to say to me, and how can I use schematisation to enhance the clarity of its message?*

The Hagstrom map names, individually, the routes and branches, and there is subtle emphasis for termini. Free transfers were few and far between in 1950s New York City – the three historic systems remained resolutely un-unified – so the transfers that were available needed to be clear, likewise the distinction between express versus local stations: a key element of Subway travel.

In terms of topography there is a natural organisation to New York City which is reflected in the shape of the subway. It was hard work laying out lines in congested areas to maintain clarity and legibility but simplifying line trajectories to an octlinear grid, without distorting the relationships between nearby stations, was not so difficult. I kept the geographical map in view while working so that an orderly design could be created without losing sight of the shape and structure of the city. I also avoided any reference to the imposing 1958 schematisation by George Salomon. The overall result, therefore, is not the map that Beck might have created, nor the one that Salomon did create. Rather, it is the design that the 1951 Hagstrom map was telling me I should create, using schematisation to highlight the underlying organisation already there.

The biggest change in my thinking over the years is my increasing determination not to casually sacrifice topography for simplicity. As my design skills have matured I have become able to appreciate that cities are not arbitrary collections of randomly pointing streets, there is an underlying order to them, it just has to be searched for. Straightening lines without thinking about the consequences of creating bizarrely space-warped locales is just lazy. With care and thought it should be possible to create a map that has simple line trajectories, is attractive to look at ***and*** is spatially informative where it matters most so that people can choose journeys confident that a distorted map is not misleading them. With the continual march of automated journey planning, this appreciation is crucial for the survival of traditional maps.

Thanks to everyone for their continual support and positive comments over the years. The decision to end the newsletter was not taken lightly but feels right. Better to step back and leave people wanting more than to outstay one's welcome.

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