Another new month, another new logo? The survey results are in and, just like my maps, you can’t please all people all the time. The responses were split between the four options (prefer the old one / like the new one / like the new one but rework it / try a different new logo). A majority of people who responded thought I needed to replace the old one, and a majority liked the banner design (whose font is a rounded version of Johnston’s typeface). Thanks for the comments, one of them inspired me to try something completely different. Let me know what you think, I have a new online survey where you can show your preference for all three and leave comments.

I have been having a clearout, and have found a batch of posters that I had printed years ago, digital implementations of drawings by Henry Beck: his attempts to create diagrammatic maps showing all London’s railways, and the Paris Metro. I don’t have the facilities to store these and, rather than gradually damaging them all, I will be giving these away during February and March. They are in good condition, suitable for a clip frame, but not perfect. For UK customers, order any A1 poster from my website during February and March and receive one copy of each of these posters free. The online price for my book is still £40 including UK delivery during February and March.

In the media, on the web
• In January, I was filmed as a participant in the 1000 Londoners project. When the video goes online, I will include a link from the newsletter.

Map research
• My survey into ratings of different Underground map designs is now closed. Thanks to everyone who responded and spread the word. With a late surge, 640 people took part, around 280 from the UK, and 120 each from from Germany and the USA/Canada. This is an excellent response, and enough for me to compare preferences of people from different countries. Until the data are fully analysed, you can download the interim report here, which also explains the background to the study.

Date for your diary
• On Tuesday 9th of June, I will be giving a presentation to the London Underground Railway Society titled Underground Maps Invigorated, 18:40, Upper Room, Allsouls Clubhouse, 141 Cleveland Street, London W1T 6QG. I will be discussing the benefits and pitfalls of digitally reconstructing historic maps. If you are a LURS member, I look forward to seeing you there. Guests are admitted, but space is limited.

Map of the Month: The ugliest London Underground map in the world?

If you took part in my survey of opinions on Underground maps, you would have found some very unusual designs, especially the three “compact” versions. I didn’t want to give the game away with an obvious title, and in fact these were deliberately created to be difficult to use, with complex line trajectories that clashed with each other. In other words, they had poor simplicity and coherence, flouting the principles of good design put forward by myself and several other researchers. Responders to the survey spotted this and, on average, each of the “compact” designs was always rated the least attractive and least usable within its trio that shared the same design rules (octolinear, curvilinear, multilineal). Of the compact maps, multilineal stood out as the least attractive, perhaps not entirely unexpected.
It is surprisingly difficult to create a good deliberately bad map. Its basic requirements are easy to state (poor simplicity, coherence, harmony, balance, and topographicity) but to be convincing, the configuration of lines must be sufficiently knotted and twisted together so that easy fixes are hard to spot. The aim is a design in which the easiest option for improving it is to throw it away and start again. The complication is, why would an errant designer choose an unusual set of design rules and then make a complete hash of implementing them? It is that illusive combination of creativity, experimentation, and incompetence that is needed. One easy way to implement this is to aim for pseudo-topographicity: bending lines to look as though these are giving geographical travel hints, but which bear little resemblance to reality. Tortuously attending to geographical accuracy in some locations and getting the configuration wrong in others is another recipe for ‘success’.

Both of these design ‘techniques’ are currently practiced in Madrid.

But why create a multilinear design to begin with? Any angles permitted might enable a map to have straighter line trajectories (albeit at the expense of more complicated angles – simplicity of line trajectories trades off with overall coherence). Multiple angles might allow a more geographically accurate design for an awkward city such as London or Paris, without descending into a mass of zigzags. But I’ve already thrown away these two design priorities, so what’s left? I decided to squash down all three of the deliberately bad maps compared with the rest, which is why they are labelled as compact. The multilinear map has a Daliesque feel perhaps, or maybe a perfectly good map was dropped on the floor, bending it out of shape.

In terms of numbers, if we score peoples’ responses and average them together, such that 100% means that everyone found a map attractive, and 0% means that no one found it attractive, compact multilinear achieved an overall attractiveness score of 19%, closely followed by geographical multilinear with 23%. Terrible scores by a long way; the remainder of the maps had aggregate ratings of 40% or more. People disliked the multilinear designs immensely but, even here, you can’t displease all people all the time. 46 people, 7% of the sample, rated compact multilinear as attractive. Even more interesting, attractiveness and usability are not fully correlated. The curvilinear maps were generally thought to be more attractive than the multilinear maps, but much less usable. Now that I have the rating data, I need to collect objective usability data to compare with the ratings. A big task, but I suspect there will be some surprises in store.

I have seen Underground maps out there even uglier than this one, but I will leave it to you to locate them. It is amazing what you can find searching the internet. Our trip to Berlin has been delayed somewhat and Map of the Month for March will feature a guest design of the New York subway. You can subscribe to the newsletter at my web pages www.tubemapcentral.com.

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