September 2015

September is conference season in the academic world, and I am shortly departing to present a poster at IIID Vision Plus 2015 at Birmingham City University. The theme for the conference is information + design = performance and so my map research should fit in well. After that, I will be attending an information design summer school at Bath Spa University. Just as well that Map of the Month for October is already finalised!

In the media, on the web
Something different this month. I am not sure of the exact details, but if you were watching a Premier League preview program somewhere on television this weekend, you might have seen one of my circular maps used to introduce a South London derby football match. If anyone did see this, do let me know.

Web page news
The staged introduction of the new logo continues, this time for the books and posters pages, and there is a lot more work going on in the background than might appear on the surface. The file structures are being modified so that updates will be easier to perform in the future. Everything is tested continually, but if any links or pages behave unexpectedly, do get in touch. I have also started experimenting with ‘favicons’.

Research news
The IIID Vision Plus poster has been added to my articles web page. I can email a pdf of this if you would like a copy. I am currently putting the finishing touches to a paper that describes an in-depth study of Docklands Light Railway train diagrams, which should be available for download soon. The next writing project is a paper that includes the results of the online usability rating study that took place last year.

Date for your diary
I will be giving my talk Transit Maps: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly to the University of the Third Age Hillingdon branch on Monday 9th May 2016, 11:00 at Winston Churchill Hall, Ruislip, HA4 7QL.

Map of the Month: Milan explorations (Part 1)
What does the best of Italian design mean to you? Sleek and elegant? Precise and individual? Sports cars? Luxury shoes and handbags? If you are a typographer, you might think of art deco lettering from the 1930s, marvelously captured by the modern-day Mostra, or perhaps Semplicità, the intriguing alternative to Futura designed by Alessandro Butti in 1930. Map enthusiasts might think of Massimo Vignelli, born in 1931 in Milan, whose approach is embodied in the famous 1972 New York City Subway map, or else the wonderful anonymous European Railways map of 1938, which I digitised for my May 2014 newsletter. On the other hand, none of you will think of any current Italian metro map, certainly not the official offering from Milan.

How could a city, known to some people as the style capital of the world, and host to Expo 2015, put its name to this? Despite the small lettering, the typography is disorganised and yet some lines are still interrupted by station names. The metro lines compete for attention with the over-differentiated stripes of the suburban railway central spine, which itself has been rolled over clockwise to 45º to conform to the doctrine of octolinearity. My own opinion (just in case any AMT lawyers get to read this) is that the map is a thoroughly insipid, lazy, careless piece of design, a classic case of knocking out something quickly without any insight into how the schematization process can assist the user. [Regular readers will know that I don’t normally rant like this in public, so something about the design must have really irritated me.]

The first step to creating a new version is to try to regroup the suburban services logically according to the routes that they take. The trajectory of the suburban railway spine is roughly 30º to horizontal, and that pointed me towards another rotated octolinear map to try to get a better match to the shape of the city compared with traditional octolinearity. [I experimented with a hexalinear version, but the result wasn’t terribly impressive.] The final design here certainly has simple straight lines, although a typographic battle is inevitable owing to the difficulties with station name placement on shallow angles.
For something much more stylised, but much less practical, a rotated tetralinear map can result in an exciting design for a small network, albeit with topographical distortion beyond the comfort zone of many people. The lines of this version rigorously align with a grid, but perhaps Milan is a bit too complex for this mapping technique to show its full potential.

Overall, it is certainly not difficult to create a Milan metro map with a little bit more style and panache than the current official version, and I’m sure that experimenting with other ideas and design rules could improve on these two versions even more. I can’t see a feasible way to implement a concentric circles map in this case though, so don’t hold your breath in the hope that you will see one soon!

Of course, one of the difficulties in mapping the Milan Metro is that it is currently not clear to an outsider exactly which of the planned extensions are actually under construction or even still being pursued. A huge expansion plan was put into action for Expo 2015, and only around half of it has been completed on time. The opening of M4 has been postponed to years in the future. As for rest of the program. Well, who knows? It certainly makes the map hard to future-proof.

Why Milan? Because a newsletter reader contacted me to suggest that I might be interested in having a go. Plus I have visited the city twice and travelled on most of its tram and trolleybus network, so I have a good idea of how everything fits together. If you think there is a city out there whose metro map might need some attention, feel free to make suggestions. Next month Milan goes curvy, and to see how, you can subscribe to my newsletter at my web pages, www.tubemapcentral.com.

Max Roberts, max@tubemapcentral.com