2017 is well and truly with us, and there seem to be quite a few unfinished maps on my computer. My New Year’s resolution will be to complete as many of these as possible, starting with the current one, which I commenced investigating over a year ago.

In the media, on the web
• A more exotic mention than usual; an amateur designer has created a concentric circles map of the Taipei Metro, Taiwan, and my own work gets a mention on the news web-page of the Eastern Broadcasting Company.

Map research
• New research has commenced this month, the first investigation that attempts to identify the aspects of maps that people focus on when judging usability. We know from past research that people’s aesthetic preferences and their usability evaluations are not quite the same, and we also know that, although traditional octolinear designs are generally favoured over others for usability (and attractiveness), this preference is not universal. The problem for the user is that, for planning a complex journey (or indeed any difficult problem solving task), there isn’t an accurate mental stopwatch that can be consulted to determine whether one design is enabling faster working compared with alternatives. We will be asking volunteers to plan journeys using various designs of maps, asking them to report their own evaluations of performance with the different versions, and seeing how closely these correspond with objective measurements, and whether these correlate with their subsequent evaluations of usability.

Map of the Month: Design on the Orient Express (Part 2)
Something about the romance of the Orient Express must bring out the creativity in designers. In my May 2014 newsletter, I presented a stunning diagrammatic map from Italy in 1938, that anticipated Henry Beck’s very own stylistic journey towards London Underground maps that were abstract and topographically distorted, dominated by horizontal and vertical lines. Now wind back the clock another decade for something almost as dramatic; the earliest map I know that combines straight lines and colour-coded routes together.

The original 1928 Belgian railway poster is a well-known design that I have included in my own book, Underground Maps Unravelled (page 166). It was created by Leo Marfurt, a Swiss artist who designed a number of railway publicity posters in a distinctive, almost abstract style, that complements the map perfectly. Of course, we should not assume that the map and the artwork are both by the same person. I chose to recreate the better-known French language version here. An English equivalent also exists, although the version I photographed at the new, excellent Belgian Railway Museum; (Train World at Schaarbbek/Schaerbeek) was in the form of a discoloured leaflet printed on poor quality paper.

Why did I recreate this poster? The limitations of the print production process a century ago might have its charms, but once a collection of digitised historic maps is created, other originals often pale by comparison. In particular, the map part of the source poster had a strangely faded appearance, with the colours notably washed-out compared with the artwork. It is hard to imagine why different tones of the same colours would be used for the map versus the artwork, and with no evidence for the use of half tones, it seemed safe to conclude that the ravages of sunlight had taken their toll on the most historically significant part of the design.
The artwork on the poster is so striking and full of period charm that it would have been a shame to reconstruct only the map, neglecting the effect as a whole. With simple shapes (deceptively so), my artistic technical limitations were not going to be exposed too much, and so I decided to recreate the entire image. Of course, in the process I introduced a whole host of anachronisms. For example, the original was designed with many ingenious colour-traps, so that the effects of print mis-registration would be minimised. Also, rather than trace every single unique individually hand-created letter, I constructed typical examples and duplicated them. My own view is that, with precision printing available, deliberately introduced variety would look wrong. The poster should not be slavishly copied and subjected to today’s printing technology, it needs to be subtly altered so that it makes design sense in this new context. Of course, readers are welcome to disagree with me on this point. They are also most welcome to have a go at reconstructing the poster for themselves!

Have I recreated history or reinvented history? For the intended viewing of the poster, from several feet away on a railway platform, the differences would be discernible only to an expert, and now that the possible fading of the map has been countered, so that the overall effect has been re-balanced, the two components can stand together as equals. There are many pitfalls in recreating old designs such as this, but genuine historical artifacts also give a misleading impression of the past in their own way. Visit any civic museum in the UK and look at its reconstructed shop fronts. Observe the faded, yellowing boxes and rusted, dented tins. The past was never like that, and any shop filled with tatty old rubbish would have soon gone out of business!

The key to reconstruction is honesty. As long as we are open about the compromises made and the reasons for them, then no one is being misled, the benefits can be enjoyed, and the costs can be noted. There are obviously many complicated issues to address, and a paper discussing these is on my list of things to do.

Maps should never be interpreted out of context. The use of straight lines in publicity to imply speed and directness were commonplace by the time this poster was created, but colour-coding to differentiate routes was rarer, with London and Paris most notably moving away from the old-fashioned practice of using colour to denote company ownership. It is unlikely that we will ever know the source of the idea that led to route colour-coding on this poster, but if I ever discover any clues, I will report back in a future newsletter. To make sure that receive it, subscribe via my web pages, www.tubemapcentral.com.

Max Roberts, mjr@tubemapcentral.com