Back from my tour of the European mainland, with five talks in three countries behind me (Austria, Germany, Netherlands). Thanks to all my hosts for their generous hospitality. It was a stimulating trip, and there should be several lines of research developing in the future as a result. Followers of my Twitter account will know that I also enjoyed Art Nouveau-verload in Vienna and Budapest, and a splendid exhibition on Mondrian and his contemporaries at the Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag. Sorry for this late newsletter, it has been a busy month!

On the web
An article in French about the Paris Metro from Graphéine magazine. There is a very nice assortment of maps, including several of my own designs, but unfortunately also some broken links already.

Map research
I am going to throw a geometry problem open and see whether anyone has any suggestions. At any given point on an ellipse, the line of the perpendicular is easy to calculate, although fiddly to implement on a computer vector graphics package. However, I'm interested in the reverse of this. Given a line of known orientation, at what point on the circumference of an ellipse would it be perpendicular? I can see ways into this problem, and trigonometry is almost certainly involved, but it is a long time since I attempted mathematical conundrums such as this, so if anyone has any suggestions, do email me.

Map of the Month: Politics versus Pragmatism?
My grand tour included a day in Berlin, and a trip on the marvelous 1920s museum train along the ornate U3 line, and so perhaps it was inevitable that Berlin would feature as the Map of the Month.

I’ve described in a previous newsletter the impossible political situation facing Berlin’s transport operators during the Cold War. The West Berlin S-Bahn, operated and financed by East Germany, was effectively driven into bankruptcy by a very effective boycott campaign organised by West Berliners. Attempts to market the system using colourful new maps were never implemented, and the remaining East German network limped along for another ten years with a potential massive hole for their drab maps where the West Berlin lines used to be. A consequence of this is one of the most famous ‘politicised’ maps of all time, with West Berlin squeezed away as an almost inconsequential insignificance.

It is a very neat and plausible story: authoritarian East German authorities wished to airbrush West Berlin out of the consciousness of their captive population, although the lengthy diversion necessary to travel from, say, Potsdam to
Alexanderplatz would be harder to eradicate from people’s awareness. However, I know from my own experience as a map historian that reality is rarely as clear-cut as entailed by single-cause explanations. Consider that schematic maps are permitted to distort topography, that including a more representative West Berlin would result in a large slab of empty dead space right next to the centre of the design, and that a compact representation would make the overall map easier to read. Wouldn’t you, as a designer, naturally think to shrink the amount of space taken up by West Berlin?

If the starting premise really was to magic away West Berlin, then there would be cleaner and more convincing ways of achieving this. I personally think that the use of the Nebenkarte inset is significant. Either the reluctant cartographer, uncomfortable at being ordered to eradicate West Berlin, tried to clear his or her conscience by flagging that the map was not all that it might seem, or else having shrunk away West Berlin as an act of cartographic economy, the designer felt troubled at the resulting distortion, and tried to imply distance by using an inset. Yet another cartographic mystery that is probably unanswerable today, although in theory there might be people out there who we can track down and ask.

Producing a vector graphics version of this was straightforward, despite the poor-quality printing, with reasonable registration for the version to hand. The typography is particularly wayward, a continuing quality of East-Berlin S-Bahn maps, giving a distinct impression that the creator really wasn’t very bothered with the overall aesthetics of the design. When faced with a situation like this, where a tidy design is neither particularly intended, nor possible without extensive reworking, I usually implement it as-is, including obvious defects. Internet discussions on Twitter suggest that a suitable font is Maxima, an East German facsimile of Univers, and the modern-day version I purchased was indeed a reasonable approximation of the letterforms. Overall the map itself, with striped interchange stations, exudes classic Soviet style and is most evocative, effectively marking the final months of a dying regime.

Returning home I have a massive to-do list, with papers to write, maps to design, and web pages to finish. Fortunately, Map of the Month for June is already complete, continuing the theme of my recent lecture tour, and giving it a nice closure. To find out what I mean by this, be sure to subscribe to my newsletter at www.tubemapcentral.com.

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