The good news is that the new university academic year is finally mostly under control and functioning, which means that it is now possible to compile a somewhat late newsletter. There are also some exciting developments in the pipeline which might mean more delays, but I hope to be on time by the new year.

Date for your diary

After some discussion, we have reluctantly decided to postpone the third Schematic Mapping Workshop. The format is not amenable to an online presentation, and more certainty is necessary concerning international travel. The workshop will now be held on 21st/22nd April, 2022, at Universität Würzburg, Germany, with all key dates moved to match. We are considering an interim online event in April 2021. If you have thoughts on this, do get in touch via the workshop website or at submissions@schematicmapping.org.

Book news

It is always good to see a new book on one of the world’s great urban rail networks, and few can offer such an interesting history as the New York City system. Subway: The Curiosities, Secrets, and Unofficial History of the New York City Transit System by John E. Morris does a really nice job of covering all aspects of this, packed full of illustrations and including engineering, technology, politics, social issues, design, and of course maps get their own chapter. Published by Black Dog & Levental, ISBN 978-0-7624-6790-7.

Map of the Month: Moscow is Egg-Shaped, not Octagonal?

In Newsletter 78, I created a Moscow Metro map with its new circle lines represented as eggs. This was a compromise between avoiding excessive topographical distortion and trying to find simple, recognisable shapes for them. Looking back, I was a bit scathing about the result, calling it a “good gimmick”. My suspicions about it were owing to (1) the creation of a hybrid design, mixing octolinear angles and curves, resulting in straight lines crossing curves at all sorts of different angles, and (2) my observation that applying regular shapes such as circles is not particularly helpful for the overall coherence of a design without addressing the trajectories of the other lines, several of which I was not happy with, such as the bend at the centre on Line 3 (dark blue). I therefore decided to try a design in which the iconic circular Line 5, the Koltsevaya Line, along with the two new circular lines (11 and 14) became hexagons of varying regularity.

I threw every coherence-maximising trick in the book at this new octolinear design, including forcing as
many of the lines as possible onto a grid, maximising their parallel running and applying symmetry wherever I could. And the result?

The positives: the design is slightly more compact than the version with space-demanding eggs, and I also managed to run Line 3 straight across the centre. But, hesitating to declare an opinion on the design – mass usability testing and ratings are much more trustworthy than a personal evaluation – the result seems rather insipid compared with the eggs map. Strict octilinearity doesn’t seem to have yielded a coherent design whose network structure leaps off the page. Perhaps those eggs really were helping to organise the design and highlight the underlying structure.

I will put this one to my readers. I suspect that there would not be a great difference in objectively measured usability between the two maps but user-engagement is an important aspect of design: the map should make people want to use it. We will be revisiting Moscow again next year. In the meantime, the map I promised for October has not been forgotten, and it will be on its way very soon. To find out more, subscribe my newsletter at www.tubemapcentral.com.

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