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Turner, Raymond

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## Designing London Transport

*Raymond Turner*



Illustrations courtesy Raymond Turner.

London's Underground Group, formed in the early 1900s by the merger of several transit companies, established a visual focus through its trademark (right) and architecture and graphics.

The Victorian era left public transportation in London with an inheritance. Beneath the ground the Metropolitan Railway was opened in 1863 — the first underground railway in the world. Over ground, public transportation relied on horse-drawn busses on the roads and steam-hauled trains.

During the early years of the twentieth century, a number of companies providing public transportation amalgamated into a larger, privately-owned organization called the Underground Group. They established a visual focus for itself through the use of a trademark comprised of a tram car in the center and underground railway lines leading to it.

The Underground Group also developed a limited architectural vocabulary for its new stations and tube lines opened in 1906. The buildings all followed the same architectural style and used a consistent approach to materials, color and lettering.

In 1933, the Underground Group amalgamated with all the other underground railways and bus and train operators in London and formed one new monopoly public body (which came to be known as London Transport), responsible to the local government. The creation of a single authority responsible for all bus, tram and underground railway operations made it possible to develop a unified

design ethic for the whole organization — an aesthetic that was consistent wherever the organization reached throughout the entire region.

London Transport was anxious to promote the public image of a progressive, efficient, caring and style-conscious company. According to Frank Pick, its chief executive, it was committed to using design as a means of harnessing commercial methods to the achievement of large social objectives.

London Transport believed that good design could mean good business. Design presented a major opportunity for the company to contribute to the creation of a civilized and well-planned urban environment.

In terms of product design its busses and underground trains were the most advanced and sophisticated in the world. Bus development culminated in the custom-designed Route Master bus and train development culminated in the fully automatic one that is running today.

In terms of environmental design it created what was termed “a new architectural idiom” consisting of two modern design concepts appropriate for central London and suburban stations. Both designs established the familiar house style of London Transport for years to come and were capable of considerable variation for different sites and structures.



The design of the London subway's newest lines echoes some of London Transport's design style but also signals the fragmentation of the system into smaller parts.



Innovative designs were also produced for rebuilding ticket halls like Piccadilly Circus and the dramatic new headquarters for the company at St. James Park. Even bus garages were treated as part of the company's public identity and were used to give it greater presence.

As far as information design was concerned, London Transport soon acquired an international reputation as a patrol of modern graphic art by commissioning colorful pictorial posters to publicize the company's services. Throughout the interwar years, London Underground stations became popular showcases for avant-garde poster design.

A particularly significant development in the company's publicity was the redesign of the geographical Underground map into the familiar, easy-to-read, topological diagram — the concept of which has been copied the world over.

Through its product, environmental and information design, London Transport was able to present to the traveling public a consolidated and unified message that every care had been taken to provide them with the best possible service, both convenient and easy to use. Each area of the design was treated with the same priority, and even earned the tangential compliment from architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner that "this was the most efficacious center of visual education in England."

But as a result of many complex factors there followed a degeneration of design throughout the organization.

Underground platform designers became preoccupied with superficial decoration, particularly in overemphasizing the geographical sense of place of each location. Passenger information on both trains and busses became sloppy, unclear and uncoordinated.



Elements of London Transport's integrated design program. Its architecture, graphics and vehicle design amounted to what one critic called "the most efficacious center of visual education in England."

Much of the hardware in use became treated as though it had nothing to contribute to the public perception of the company.

There was even gross disrespect for the one thing that the company had developed and established as representing all that was good in public transportation and in London — the symbol. It was redrawn in a variety of comic ways, often degenerating into advertising gimmicks for such things as the London Transport health plan or annual carol service.

It would be oversimplifying the situation to say that all this happened as a result of one incident. During the 1970s plans were made to move the control of London Transport away from local government to central government. Perhaps these political issues diverted everyone's attention from the integrated design policy.

In the early 1980s a new authority was created — London Regional Transport — and after that London Transport ceased to exist as a company. This new body was charged with pro-

viding the most cost effective passenger service within greater London. Part of its task was to make the main businesses of underground and bus services profitable so they were not so dependent on public financial support. In 1982 two major subsidiaries were created, one called London Underground Limited and one called London Busses Limited. The creation of these operationally independent subsidiaries presented LRT with the problem of formulating its own design strategy for the future.

These changes have led to an ironic situation. Whereas design was once used to draw together the activities of a number of different companies at the turn of the century and unite them into an integrated transport service during the mid-century, the company was then faced with using design to help it handle precisely the reverse situation — to allow the controlled fragmentation of the business on one hand while presenting a coordinated transport service to the public on the other.