

10. Design and Corporate Identity

Of all the ways in which design can influence the way we think, the only one to have been acknowledged widely has been its use to express the identity of organisations. Empires, armies, navies, religious orders and modern corporations have all used design to convey ideas about what they are like both to insiders and to the outside world. Thus, as the Romans conquered successive nations and races and incorporated them within their Empire, buildings in recognisably Roman, rather than local style, helped to impress upon subject nations the supremacy of Roman law and government, while it also helped to ensure that Roman settlers in distant parts of the Empire did not forget their allegiance to Rome and became too closely identified with the native populations.

Several hundred years later, the new monastic orders of the early Middle Ages used architecture in a similar way to impress upon monks the supremacy of their order above purely local interests. Until the development of the Cluniac order in the tenth century, Christian monasticism had been cellular in organisation: the many individual monasteries all followed broadly the rule of St Benedict, but they were otherwise independent and, apart from acknowledging the authority of the Pope, belonged to no hierarchy. Gradually, in the tenth century, the abbey of Cluny became the centre of monastic reform, and its revised and more rigorous system of rule was introduced into many monasteries throughout Western Europe; Cluny became their spiritual head, dispensing rules and advice to other houses, and often providing them with abbots. Along with the new monastic ideal, the Cluniacs also carried with them a preference for a particular form of architecture, subsequently to become known as the Romanesque. Though there is no evidence to suggest that the Cluniacs intended their architecture to demonstrate the principles of their order in any particularly direct way, or that they were very dogmatic in its application, Romanesque became closely associated in people's minds with the abbey of Cluny.*

In the twelfth century, the influence of the Cluniacs was supplanted by a new monastic reform movement, the Cistercian order, centred on the abbey of Clairvaux. Like the Cluniacs, the Cistercians developed a preferred form of architecture, which was to be the basis of the Gothic style, and they disseminated this with considerable energy. New Cistercian houses were built according to a strict pattern, which was reproduced in all the countries where they established foundations. The ground plans were so similar that a monk from France visiting an abbey in England could immediately comprehend its layout and organisation; equally, the appearance of each abbey identified it as Cistercian. There were

*A. W. Clapham, *English Romanesque Architecture after the Conquest*, Oxford, 1934, pp. 74-83.

clear advantages in this architectural policy; it made Cistercian houses and Cistercian monasticism easy to distinguish from backward and unreformed monasteries, and it impressed upon the monks and abbots their allegiance to the order, whose authority extended across national and political boundaries. Any inclinations by particular abbeys to develop independent rules, or to secede from the order, were discouraged not only by the routine visits of monks from other houses in the order, but also by the enduring presence of the distinctive architecture of their buildings.*

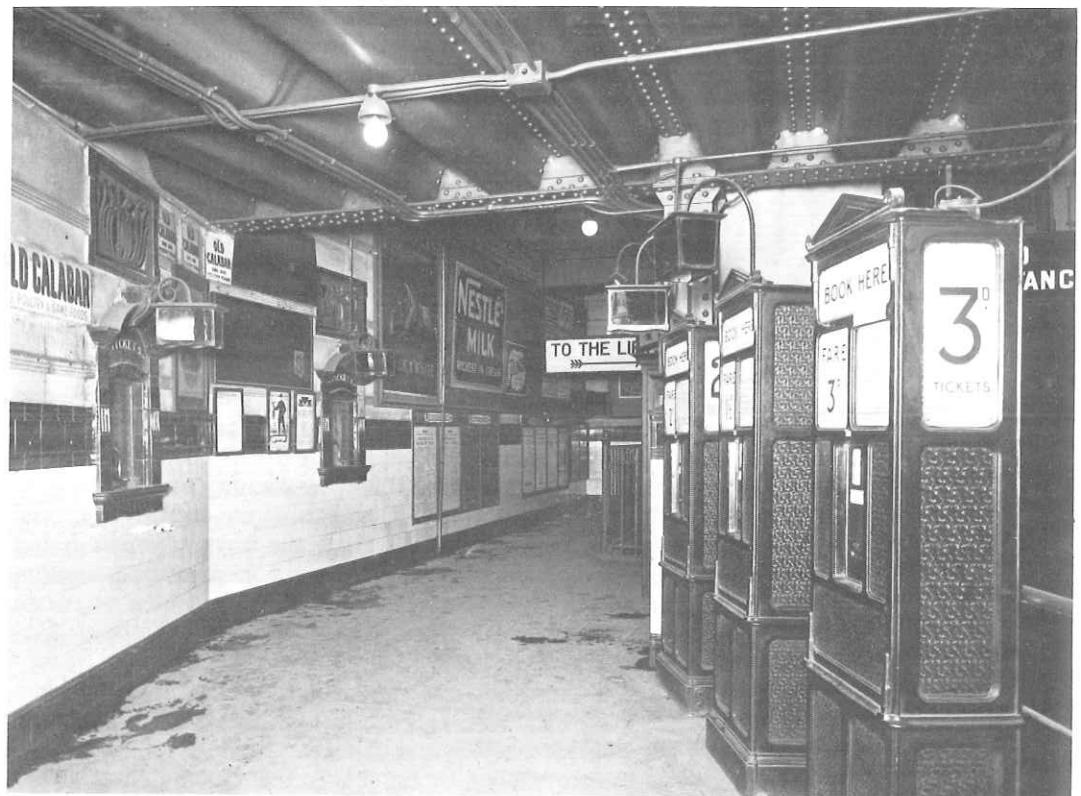
Organisations which extend over a large geographical area, perhaps across different countries and languages, have always had difficulties in maintaining their cohesion. The problems were as great for the monastic orders of the Middle Ages as they are for multi-national companies today; the design policies of a company like IBM, which operates in many countries, have been developed to fulfill much the same purpose as early Gothic architecture served for the Cistercians, making the identity of the company apparent to the employees, and advertising the company's special characteristics to the public. Some of the ways in which design has been used by modern organisations to hold themselves together and to publicise themselves have been described by a corporate identity consultant, Wally Olins, in his book, *The Corporate Personality*, published in 1978.

The book is so informative that I need do no more here than summarise his argument. Design, he says, can be used to convey to people the shape and nature of organisations that might otherwise appear formless, either because of their geographical spread or because they have come into existence through the merging of many smaller organisations. Particularly for a large organisation, made up of many smaller companies, each of which may be better known to the public and to the stock market, design is a way of conveying their collective identity to the world; in helping the employees of the separate parts of a large company to recognise the identity of the whole, it can counteract the hostilities that often arise between those working for the different parts of conglomerates that have been created by mergers. Rather than simply adding to Olins's list of examples, the rest of this chapter will be taken up with considering the variety of problems that were resolved through the use of design in a single organisation.

London Transport: the creation of a public transport conglomerate

London Transport provides one of the best known and most often quoted case histories of corporate design. However, the way in which it has been discussed exemplifies the inadequacies of much design criticism and history, in particular the tendency to isolate design in a make-believe world of pure aestheticism. Little attention has been paid to why design was so important to London Transport, or what it was expected to do; and most of the discussion has been centred on the contribution of one man, Frank Pick. In the 1920s, Pick was the managing director of the company that ran most of London's buses and underground railways, and in 1933, he became the Vice Chairman and Chief Executive of the newly-formed London Passenger Transport Board, a post which he held until 1940. While Pick undoubtedly conceived London Transport's design policy, and much of the success in its execution was due to him, it would be wrong to suppose that the policy was

*Joan Evans, *Monastic Life at Cluny 910-1157*, London, 1931; and Joan Evans, *The Romanesque Architecture of the Order of Cluny*, Cambridge, 1938.



Ticket Hall, Euston underground station, photographed in 1924. A typical station entrance before the design reforms of the 1930s.

*Nikolaus Pevsner, 'Patient Progress One: Frank Pick', in his *Studies in Art, Architecture and Design*, vol.2, London, 1968, pp.190-209 (reprinted from *Architectural Review*, vol.XCII, 1942). For an earlier version of the argument developed in this chapter, see A. Forty, 'Lorenzo of the Underground', *London Journal*, vol.5, no.1, 1979, pp.113-119.

*C. Barman, 'Frank Pick', *Architectural Review*, vol.XCI, 1942, pp.1-2; and C. Barman, *The Man Who Built London Transport*, Newton Abbot, 1979.

motivated solely by his taste and his own aesthetic idealism. The descriptions that have laboured Pick's belief in the moral and regenerative powers of design and his support for 'modernism' have largely ignored the fact that he was the manager of a large and very complicated organisation, and everything he did about design or anything else had to satisfy commercial ends and to meet with the approval of the rest of the management. Although Pick believed, in the tradition of John Ruskin and William Morris, that design could raise human life to a higher spiritual level, his choice of designs was based upon what he judged would be good for London Transport. To separate Pick's interest in design from his role as a manager of London Transport, as Sir Nikolaus Pevsner's article about him did, is to sever design from the sinews of material life, a form of butchery too often performed by historians of the subject, generally to fatal effect.*

One of the few people to have acknowledged the commercial aspects of London Transport's design policy was Christian Barman, who was publicity manager in the 1930s and was responsible for the co-ordination of the design policy.* Yet even he does not make altogether clear how important design was in management, or exactly how it was used to deal with the problems that beset London Transport during the inter-war years. Those problems have been described very extensively by T.C. Barker and Michael Robbins in volume two of their *History of London Transport*. Like most historians, however, Barker and Robbins appear unaccustomed to thinking of design as having any relevance outside purely artistic, or technical spheres. That it might have affected the entire way in which the population of London regarded London



Ticket Hall, Southgate station, opened in 1933. The orderliness and unity of the design of this new station on the Piccadilly line extension contrasts sharply with the Euston entrance. The photograph is at night: in daylight the hall is lit naturally by the clerestory windows encircling the space.



Escalator Tunnel at Turnpike Lane station, opened in 1932. The spaciousness and dignity of the new stations on the Piccadilly line extension signified a new era in underground travel.

Transport and might have influenced the development of ideas about the size, shape and character of the city does not seem to have occurred to them, though from remarks in his writings it is clear that these possibilities had been appreciated by Frank Pick.

During the inter-war years, Londoners saw considerable changes in the appearance of their public transport. Underground station entrances which had been poorly lit, dark lobbies, like the entrances to hell, became open, bright and airy spaces. Escalators, lit by reflected light, replaced lifts at many stations. Beneath, the cavernous tunnels which had been lined with white glazed bricks like public

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Capital letters of Edward Johnston's 1916 typeface for the Underground Electric Railways of London. The typeface was adopted for all London Transport's lettering.

lavatories or workhouse reception wards, were refaced with square cream tiles that reflected a softer light and did not show the dirt so easily. The station signs were laid out in an orderly manner and were clearly distinguished from the posters lining the platforms by the red and blue roundel, which was the symbol of the Underground. Throughout the system, the same clear lettering was used for station signs, directions and information; the typeface, designed by Edward Johnston in 1916, became a distinctive mark



Station Furniture for London Transport, incorporating roundel and station signs, 1933.



Platform, Bounds Green station, in 1932. The improvements to station design gave the platform tunnel a smooth shell, improved the lighting, and clearly distinguished station signs from posters.

of the company and was in time extended throughout the system to identify all its property and all its publicity. The station furniture was a model of pure, simple design, as neat and orderly as the typeface. In the stations and outside them, posters in artistic styles otherwise rarely found outside Bond Street art galleries advertised the joys of travel by this efficient and orderly system. On the railways, the locomotives of the earlier trains were gradually eliminated and the motors installed under the floors of the carriages, to give more passenger space; pneumatic doors operated by the guard replaced passenger-operated doors and gates, while the interiors of the carriages became increasingly seamless in appearance, with flush surfaces, faired-in details, invisible bolts and screws, high-quality upholstery to specially commissioned designs, and special bulbous handholds to replace the earlier strap loops. Above ground, the motor buses changed during the 1930s from crude machines like orange boxes on wheels to sleek objects with every constructional detail concealed beneath shaped panels.

These changes took place gradually until, by 1939, the single most striking characteristic of London Transport was that all the parts – every station, bus, train, poster, seat and litter bin – were identifiable as the property of a single organisation. This is not a solution to transport design that can be taken for granted: other capital cities, though their rail and road services may be run by a single organisation, have not gone to such lengths to identify them as such.

The reasons behind London Transport's approach come from its history. Its origins lay in the many independent bus, underground railway and tram companies that developed in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century.*



Left:
Piccadilly line carriage in 1923.
Relatively large amounts of
dark woodwork and low
lighting levels were
characteristic of carriages before
the design reforms.



Left:
Bakerloo line carriage, 1938.
The new carriage designs
reduced the amount of
woodwork, made the more
numerous handholds integral
with the interior, and modified
the carriage lighting.

Right:
ST Bus, 1929. The type of bus
most widely used by the
London General Omnibus Co.
in the late 1920s.



The first underground railway in London, the Metropolitan, was opened in 1863, with a service between Paddington and Farringdon Street; in the succeeding forty years, new lines were built by other companies, creating a network of separate routes beneath London. A short period of rash speculation in the early part of this century made it clear that some of these lines had been very expensive enterprises and that they were none too profitable. By 1906, one group, the Underground Electric Railways of London (UERL), was on the brink of financial disaster, from which it was saved only by agreeing to co-operate with some of the other underground railway companies. The scheme began by offering through booking between any two stations on the network, which simplified travel and helped to increase traffic. In 1908, the companies agreed to publicise themselves collectively as a single Underground system, though they remained financially independent. However, in 1907, a new manager of UERL had been appointed, a man called Albert Stanley, who was to prove a most remarkable and able entrepreneur. Under his direction UERL succeeded by 1913 in merging fully with most of the other Underground companies. However, the underground had been suffering severely from competition by the newly developed motor bus. Recognising the great advantages and profitability of the bus, in 1912 the UERL



Two Dennis buses of the P.C. Co., 1924. The rivalry of independent bus operators, their buses identified by different liveries, was a feature of London's transport in the 1920s.

bought up the largest of the bus companies, the London General Omnibus Company (LGOC), and all but one of the smaller companies. Thus by 1913, UERL controlled most of London's transport, with the exception of the tramways, most of which were run by local government authorities.

During the 1920s, further acquisitions and development increased the size and the scope of the operations of UERL, but a number of newly formed independent bus companies, as well as the continued independence of the Metropolitan Railway and of the local authority trams, prevented the combine from establishing a monopoly of London's transport. Lord Ashfield (as Stanley had been created in 1920) was convinced that a public transport business in London could be a commercial success only if it were a monopoly administered by a single management, with the entire fare revenue from all forms of public transport at its disposal. Because it proved impossible for the UERL to establish a monopoly by means of the customary commercial processes of takeovers and mergers, only government intervention could bring about what Ashfield believed to be necessary. Through a somewhat surprising alliance between Ashfield and Herbert Morrison, the Minister of Transport in the 1929 Labour Government, a scheme was agreed upon which would transfer the ownership and management of all London's buses, trams and railways (with the exception of those owned by the main line railways companies) to a new single authority. The result was the creation in 1933 of London Transport, under the control of the London Passenger Transport Board (LPTB), a body which was neither a nationalised industry, since it continued to have equity stockholders, nor a normal public company since the stockholders had no voting rights. Lord Ashfield was made chairman of the LPTB, and, since the UERL combine constituted by far the largest part of the new London Transport, its interests and former staff dominated the management. The LPTB continued in existence until 1948, when it was fully nationalised along with the rest of the rail and road services in Britain.

*F. Pick, 'Organisation of Transport with Special Reference to the London Passenger Transport Board', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, vol. 84, 1936, p. 207; Barker and Robbins, p. 283.

Design Unifies the System.

*London Passenger Transport Board, *Fifth Annual Report*, London, 1938, para. 10.

*LPTB, *Fifth Annual Report*, para. 27. See also H.A. Clegg, *Labour Relations in London Transport*, Oxford, 1950, pp. 17-18 and pp. 32-36.

London Transport was created through the amalgamation of 165 companies that had once been separate and independent. Of these companies, 73 had already been merged with the UERL combine before 1933, but the remaining 92 had to be incorporated into London Transport in 1933.*

Historically, London Transport was therefore a conglomerate, which had to establish for itself a distinctive identity that would successfully contain all its disparate parts, a problem that had already faced the UERL combine in its takeover and merger activities. However, UERL had not troubled itself too much about using visible means to unify all its separate activities and there was nothing about the appearance of one of the LGOC's buses to indicate that it belonged to the same organisation as a District Railway train. Although some attempts were made in the 1920s to give the UERL combine a corporate identity, it was not until the formation of London Transport in 1933 that a comprehensive design policy was energetically pursued.

With hindsight, one can see two distinct reasons for London Transport's corporate design policy. One concerned internal organisation and labour relations; the other was to encourage people to travel more.

The task of integration faced by the LPTB in 1933 caused difficulties for several years, as it depended not only on managerial changes and technical reforms, such as the standardisation of equipment, but also on transferring employees' allegiance from former independent companies to the Board.* To avoid labour disputes, the Board took great trouble to unify the wage scales of its employees* and to remove all trace of the identity of the former independents, discarding their separate operating rules, schedules and liveries in favour of a uniform identity for London Transport.



Bus conductor's winter uniform, 1933. When the various independent companies were merged with the LGOC in 1933, new uniform designs helped smooth the process of unification.

A strong design identity encouraged the staff to see themselves as the employees not of a once independent company that had been taken over but of a unified London Transport.

Encouraging more travel involved the transformation of the popular perception of public transport from a daily inconvenience into a comfortable experience and the means to a fuller and richer life. While faster journey times, better schedules and greater comfort might be appreciated by those who travelled regularly on particular routes, the problem was to tell those who did not about the improvements that were being made. Fast journeys are transient experiences that are quickly forgotten, but buildings, trains and buses are lasting and are the signs by which transport systems are known to people. If these things could be designed to be obviously rational, efficient, and co-ordinated, they would speak the same message about the services they provided. The attention given to the design of stations, buses, trains, publicity and even seemingly insignificant objects like bus stops and ticket machines all contributed to the image of a planned and co-ordinated system.

Most of the stations that were built on the various suburban extensions to the underground lines between 1923 and 1950 had certain features in common. Many of them were designed by the architect Charles Holden, who was responsible for the development

Ticket Hall, Northfields station, 1933. The clerestory lighting system extensively used by the architect, Charles Holden, for the new Underground stations served to light the stations internally by day, and advertise them externally by night.



Top deck interior of RT bus, 1939. The almost seamless finish was one of the most successful examples of London Transport's pre-war design policy.

of the formula that was used, with variations, in different places. Instead of the dark, cavernous interiors of the older stations, Holden designed the new stations where possible with a double-storey-height interior space, which was illuminated with natural light by clerestory windows. During the day, light from the windows filled the booking hall, while at night the interior lighting illuminated the windows so that they shone out into the darkness, beckoning to travellers. Inside the stations, the booking kiosks, ticket machines, station bookstalls, light fittings, passenger barriers and fire-fighting equipment were all designed to harmonise with each other. It was a principle enunciated by Pick and observed by Holden and the other architects employed by London Transport in the inter-war years that every element should bear a visual relation to everything else. The order and harmony of details was calculated to lead the passenger to think that nothing had been left to chance and that, by analogy, the system as a whole was designed and managed with the same thoroughness. The stations designed in the 1930s were the most concentrated examples of this philosophy, but the same principle was applied to the design of London Transport's other property, in particular its trains and buses. The first bus to be designed for the LPTB, the RT, introduced in 1939, became famous for its stylishness and its reliability. Although modelled on the STL bus designed for the LGOC and introduced in 1932, the RT greatly surpassed the earlier model in the quality of its detail. The structure was concealed beneath panels, every screw and bolt was hidden, and every angled joint rounded; the light bulbs were set into the ceiling to form a row of exactly hemispherical protrusions, the window winders were elegantly formed,

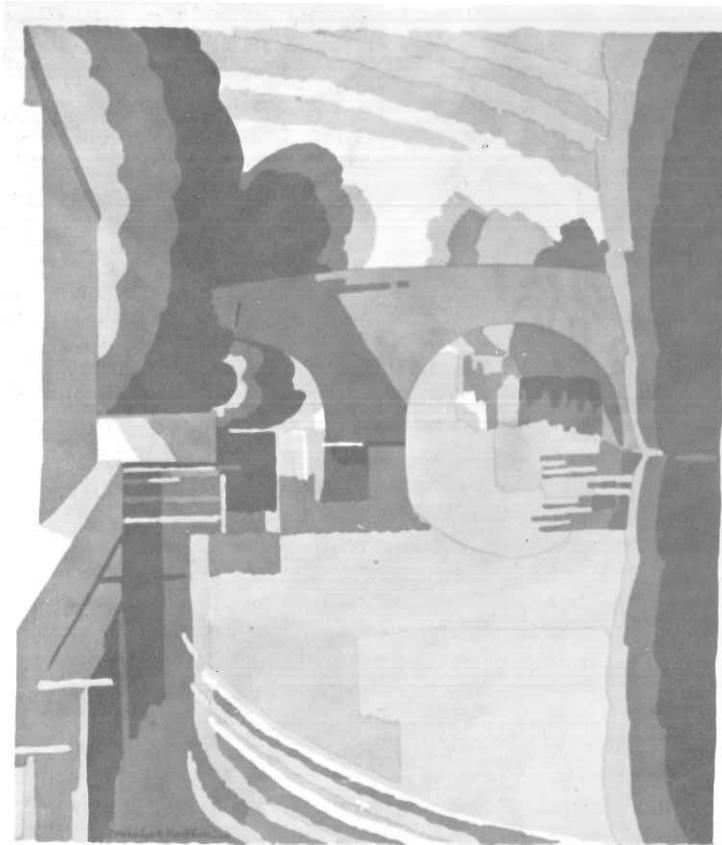


Underground Poster, 1924,
designed by E. McKnight
Kauffer. Underground posters
used avant-garde art to
stimulate off-peak travel.

and the upholstery was covered in fabrics of abstract patterns designed by *avant-garde* textile designers. A single object could hardly go further in conveying the impression of order, harmony, integrity and attention to detail than the RT bus. The fact that the same design features were common to the Underground stations and to other buses was likely to contribute to the passenger's sense that London's transport was indeed a system. Although the stations built for the Underground extensions in the 1920s and 1930s were not all exactly the same, they had the same materials and finishes, and had the booking kiosks and barriers laid out on the same principles, giving passengers a sense of familiarity and recognition wherever they went. While many older stations remained unchanged, the effect of the new stations was to make it seem to the public that the Underground railways were no longer a disparate and unplanned agglomeration

LGOC Poster, 1925, designed by E. McKnight Kauffer. Advertising was particularly directed at promoting leisure time travel to the countryside, on outlying routes, the least economic parts of the system.

*F. Pick, lecture at London School of Economics, 26th February 1934, *Transport World*, vol.75, 1934, pp.119-123, quoted in Barker and Robbins, p.288.

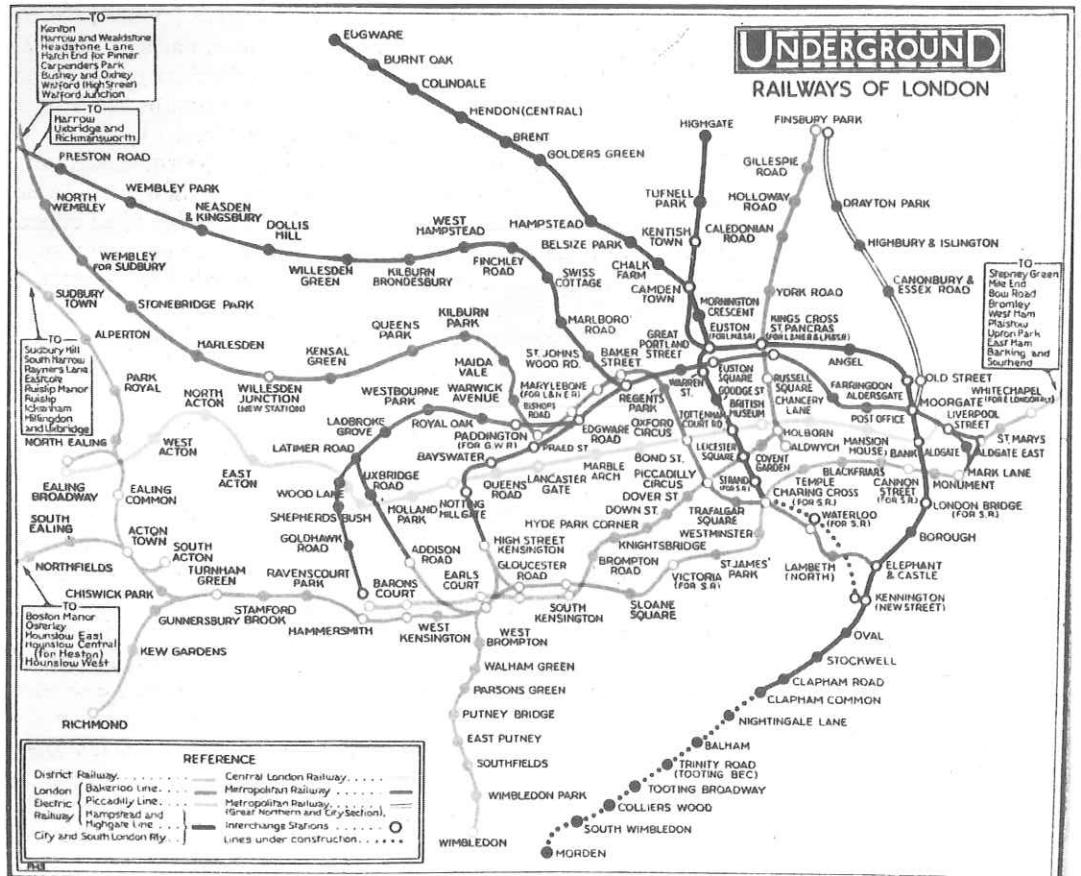


THE COLNE RIVER AT UXBRIDGE BY TRAM

of lines but that they had become part of an orderly and centrally planned system.

As well as conveying the system's orderliness, design also communicated its modernity. The adoption of conspicuously modern design by London Transport in the 1930s was not motivated simply by Pick's liking for the style, but by the fact that it conformed to the image of London Transport as advanced and progressive. A characteristic of Pick's management was his extensive use of statistics and his belief that the management of a transport system was a scientific matter. Pick boasted that:

"The whole atmosphere in which the work is carried on and the whole attitude towards the circumstances of the problem have been changed. It is a noteworthy gain to have placed the study of traffic and the determination of its problems upon a scientific footing."*



Underground Map, 1924. The stations are in their geographically correct positions.

The adoption of modern (and therefore scientific and functionalist) design was complementary to the management's ideals for the organisation, and it provided a way of telling the public about these otherwise invisible changes.

The earliest use of self-consciously 'modern' design in the Underground had appeared on the posters used to advertise the system. The use of pictorial posters to advertise travel was already established in Britain by the first years of the century, and the Underground was simply following the example of other railway companies when it started to advertise in the same way around 1906. However, during World War I, the Underground began to publish posters that made use of imagery and motifs from *avant-garde* art; posters designed, most notably by Edward McKnight Kauffer, to represent the benefits and joys of travel used artistic devices that would at the time have been quite unfamiliar to most people, and would have signified the underground electric railway as uncompromisingly modern.

As Christian Barman has written, the purpose of these posters was in 'persuading people to make journeys it had not occurred to them to make.'* However, because travel is only a means to an end, they did not advertise the services themselves, but they drew people's attention to things that they could do as a result of making a journey. The posters therefore publicised London's assets and attractions: places to visit, such as Hampton Court or Greenwich, London's West End shops, its theatres and cinemas and, above

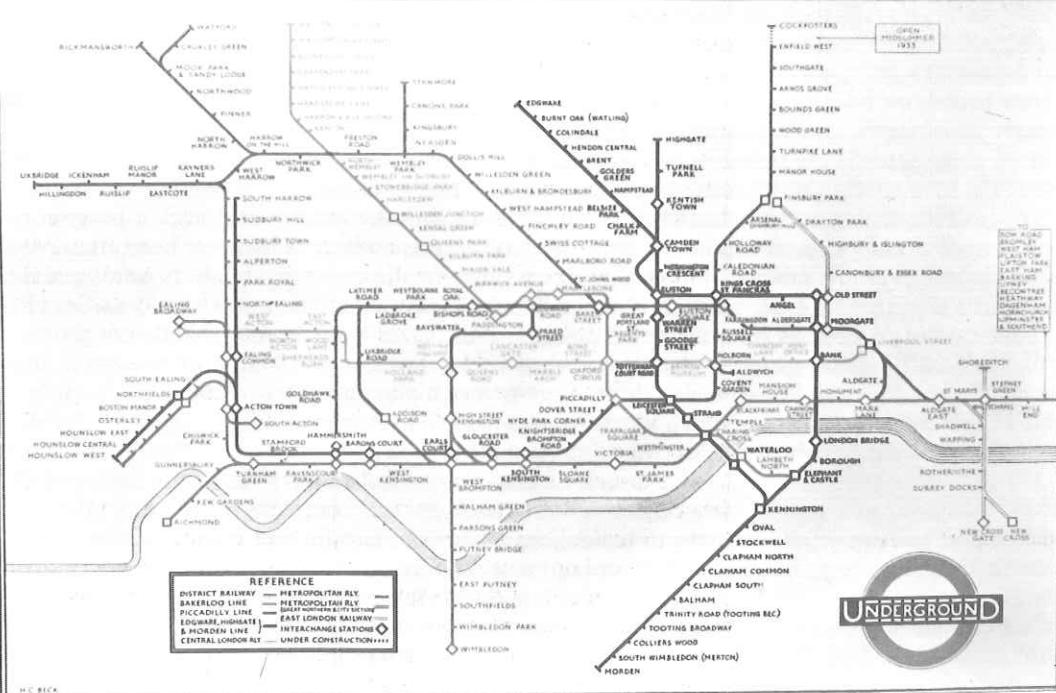
*Barman, 1979, p.31.

*LPTB, *Fifth Annual Report*, para.80.

all, the surrounding countryside. The advertisements aimed to encourage people to travel on the under-utilised parts of the network, the off-peak services, and the outer suburban routes. It is hard to say precisely how effective they were, though, by 1938, a considerable proportion of traffic was being generated by this kind of travel. It was estimated that one third of all journeys were for purposes other than travelling to work, and since almost all of these journeys took place outside the peak travel periods and so added nothing to the capital cost of providing the services, they represented an important part of London Transport's total revenue.* At the same time, the advertisements drew attention to the diversity of London and suggested the opportunities it offered, changing people's perceptions of the city from merely a place of dismal labour to a metropolis offering unlimited resources for every pursuit.

However, of all the means by which the UERL combine or London Transport changed people's ideas about the capital, none was more lasting and influential than the Underground map. So effective was this strikingly simple and legible map, introduced in 1931, that its representation of London has become one of the most widely accepted mental images for the city. Yet for all its clarity, it is highly misleading; unlike the previous maps, which represented the stations in their correct geographical positions, the new map not only reorganised the lines along horizontal, vertical or 45 degree axes, but also enlarged the distance between the stations in the central area, and reduced that between the stations in the outer area. The result was to make London look very much smaller than it actually is, as the outlying areas seem deceptively close to the centre. While this had the virtue of making the map very easy to read, it also, by making the distance between the suburbs and the centre look so small, induced people to undertake journeys they might otherwise have hesitated to make. Not only does the

Underground Map, 1931. The first of the new schematic maps, which enlarged the central area relative to the outer area.



map distort the actual length of the journeys, making a trip from, say, Ruislip to Leytonstone seem very much less formidable than it actually is, but it also makes some of the other obstacles in such a journey seem considerably less significant than they really are. In particular, the arrangements for changing from one line to another are represented on the map by a standard symbol which obscures the true nature of the difficulties involved at some stations. Although improvements were gradually made in the connections between the lines as stations were rebuilt, the legacy of a system that originated as a series of separate lines run by independent companies continued, and still continues, to make itself felt. The difficulties involved in changing from, say, the Northern to the Circle line at Kings Cross, involving two escalators, staircases and some hundreds of yards walking, do not appear in their full enormity on the map. In giving the semblance of order and method to a series of railways that were not originally conceived as a system, the Underground map has been remarkably successful, at the cost of some deception. It is impossible to say to what extent London Transport's design policies excited people's appetite for travel, but there seems every reason to believe that by making travel seem easy, effortless and enjoyable, they contributed to the very substantial leisure traffic.

Before World War II, London Transport was in a more favourable position than it has since enjoyed; it had acquired monopoly powers, and the expansion of the suburbs created a growing demand for transport, while car ownership had not yet begun seriously to erode the traffic figures. During this period, considerable improvements were made to the quality of the services, which were unified within a system. But it was a system that no individual could perceive as a whole, for it was impossible to see more than one part of it at a time. It was highly desirable, though, that people should be aware of the changes, both for London Transport's public and political reputation, and for the sake of attracting passengers. The unified design policy, by identifying every object, bus stop, station sign, or train as belonging to the Board, and bearing a visible relation to every other piece of the Board's property, succeeded in communicating the presence of a system that was more than the sum of its parts.

The use of corporate design to consolidate the results of mergers and takeovers has become rather familiar in the last thirty years, but at the time when Pick first contemplated such a programme in the early 1930s, nothing as ambitious had ever been attempted. London Transport's use of design to establish its unity remains outstanding for its results. All too often, corporate identities have ended up looking like cheap off-the-peg suits that do not properly fit the organisation within; but London Transport's design identity was nothing if not a very high class piece of tailoring. Because so much attention was paid to making the design represent the aims of the organisation, and so much care was taken in fitting the identity to the design of each individual object, the result conveyed the impression of thoroughness and complete integration. Although today dilapidation, makeshift repairs and demoralisation among the staff have eroded the force of the vision, it is still occasionally possible, standing on a suburban Piccadilly Line platform, to glimpse how a progressive style applied consistently throughout the system created an organisation with which every employee could identify with pride.

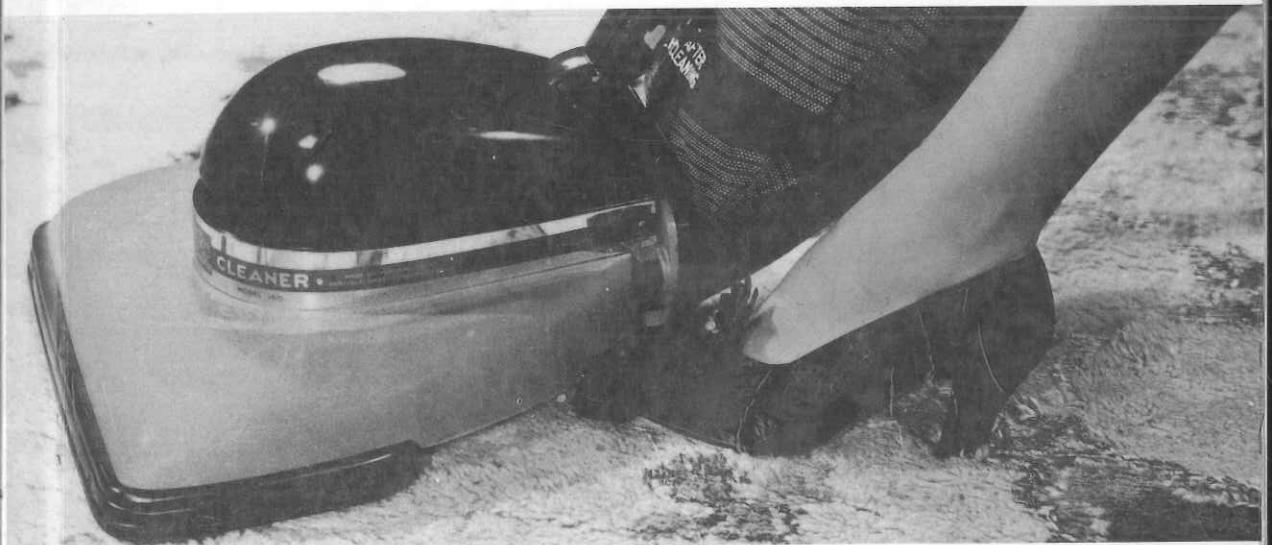
11. Design, Designers and the Literature of Design

Compared to most works on the history of design, this book has referred very little to individual designers. Although the development of design as a specialised activity requiring particular skills was described in the first two chapters, this has been a book about design rather than about designers and their careers, ideas and theories. It is worth considering here why so many other books claim to be about design, but turn out to be concerned largely with the lives and works of individuals.

Much time and effort has been put into identifying often obscure people and researching their careers, although such knowledge adds relatively little to the significance of their designs. It seems odd that the biographies of individuals should be considered a satisfactory means of explaining an activity that is by nature social and not purely personal. The history of architecture and design is full of attempts to make sense of buildings and objects through the careers, ideas and theories of known designers, and the approach is to be found even in works that are not specifically biographies. For example, in *Pioneers of Modern Design*, which appeared in its revised form over thirty years ago and must be one of the most widely read books on design, Nikolaus Pevsner's main purpose was to establish a historical pedigree for Modern Movement architecture and design. However, his method was based on the assumption that design could be understood satisfactorily by examining its products with reference only to the careers and published statements of individual designers. Yet there seems no particular reason why the often obscure and long-winded statements made by architects and designers should provide a complete or even adequate account of the buildings or artefacts they design. If political economy consisted only of the study of the economy in the light of the statements made by politicians, the subject would indeed do little to increase our understanding of the world. Clearly, it would be foolish to dismiss designers' statements altogether, but we should not expect them to reveal all there is to know about design. After all, they themselves are not the cause of design having become such an important activity in modern society, and we should not assume that they hold any superior knowledge about the reasons for its importance.

The emphasis on the person of the designer to the exclusion of all other considerations has been particularly marked in the way that manufactured goods have been displayed in museums and exhibitions. For example, in 1979, the Arts Council of Great Britain mounted a large exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in London under the title 'Thirties' in which specimens of British art, architecture and design of the 1930s were displayed. Most of the artefacts on

Objects of Desire



DESIGN AND SOCIETY SINCE 1750

Adrian Forty