

Yet another new design for an old map

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Keywords: map design, transit, subway, network

Abstract:

There's a large underground group of people who assert that the London Underground map is no longer fit for purpose and simply relies on its lauded history as a descendent of Harry Beck's magnificent 1933 original. I'm one of those people. In 2019 I created a totally new design for the map. The map received many comments. In May 2022 the new Elizabeth Line was opened by the Queen. The official map received a major update. And the voices decrying it grew louder, so I've revisited my map and created two new versions, incorporating the new network additions.

The original 1933 map is a cartographic icon and undeniably useful for navigation and wayfinding. Topological, reductive, and eschewed above-ground detail (other than the river), and used a minimalist symbol vocabulary with bright colours to distinguish different lines. It focussed on the following main design elements: omission of detail; distortion of scale; schematicised; colour-coded to fit with a wider corporate design; straight lines – horizontal, vertical, 45° indicative of speed and efficiency of the network; and diamonds for interchange stations.

It was a practical outcome as much as a perhaps unintentional but brilliant design statement. There were only 7 lines, and 212 stations. There are now 11 tube lines, a light railway, 5 overground services, a tram network, and several rail services with over 480 stations. But it still retains the same basic principles that Beck brought to the map. In my view it's lost its way and is full of clutter.

Like previous editions of the official map new components of the network are simply added. There's little or no omission. No craft. No movement of elements to accommodate additions. The one glaring error on the new map is inconsistency. A consistent design language is the cornerstone of any well designed map. Some lines are abutted, some are not, despite the same physical character. Some lines cut across others with a small margin, most do not. The once simple interchange symbol is now cumbersome (and too prominent) and connectors are overused, particularly at heavily connected stations. So many unnecessary bends and curves are used to accommodate decisions made on previous versions. Some connectors are ridiculously long, even when the distance is short. Typography, alignment and justification is inconsistently applied. Even when you consult the legend this map still has the potential to confuse.

I literally tore my 2019 map apart, and rebuilt it taking account of feedback on the first version, plus my editorial review of the current official map. The result with a better overall balance. Stations first, not lines (Figure 1). I've used hierarchical typography, and colour coded by function and connectivity. There's a simpler station and connector symbology to avoid the overbearing blobs on the official map. The current official tube map has 259 curves and 256 interchange symbols. Mine has 195 curves and 225 interchange symbols. It's 19.5% more graphically efficient.

But I wanted to go further. The current official classification of lines is heavily based on historical organisation, and colours. But it's potentially misleading because of the insistence on using a legacy classification which has been inconsistently applied. There are lots of different modes of travel because not everything is underground, or even a tube train. And there are even multiple routes even for what is currently shown as a single line.

I therefore also suggest a new colour scheme which is accessible to folks with different colour vision. It's consistent, and coherent, and suits 2022 much better than a graphical signage system devised nearly 100 years ago. This new schema also now means the map can incorporate additional, useful information that the current map does not, and cannot. There are multiple routes along and within each line which the official map doesn't show. Stations that act as a terminus for a specific route get additional colour-coded (by mode) text to note that designation, and along the lines there are indicators of what routes use that segment (again, colour coded to match the mode), making it easy to see what routes operate from the station you are at, and what routes you need to get to where you're going (Figure 2).

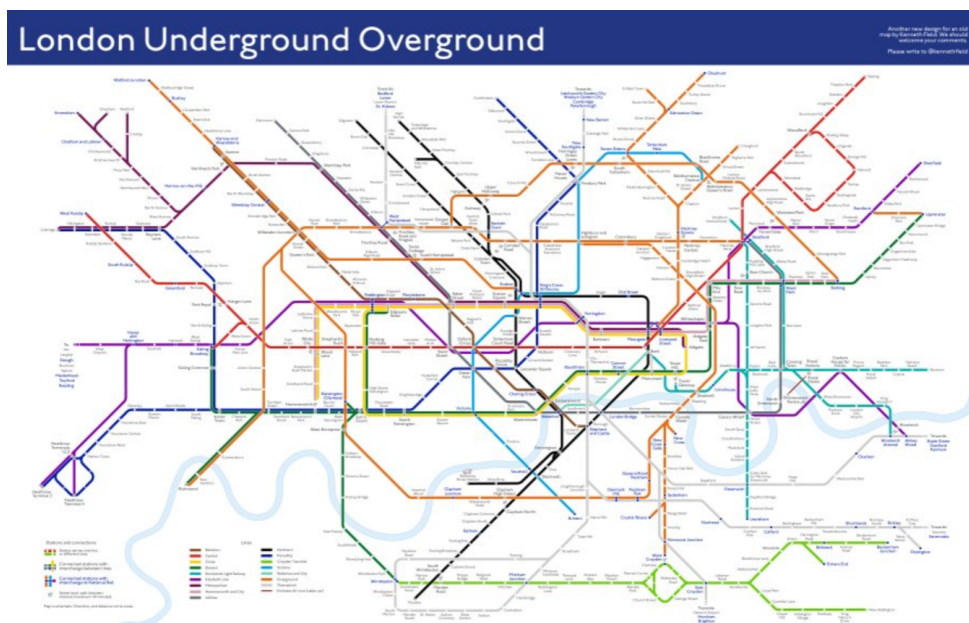


Figure 1. London Underground Overground with traditional colours

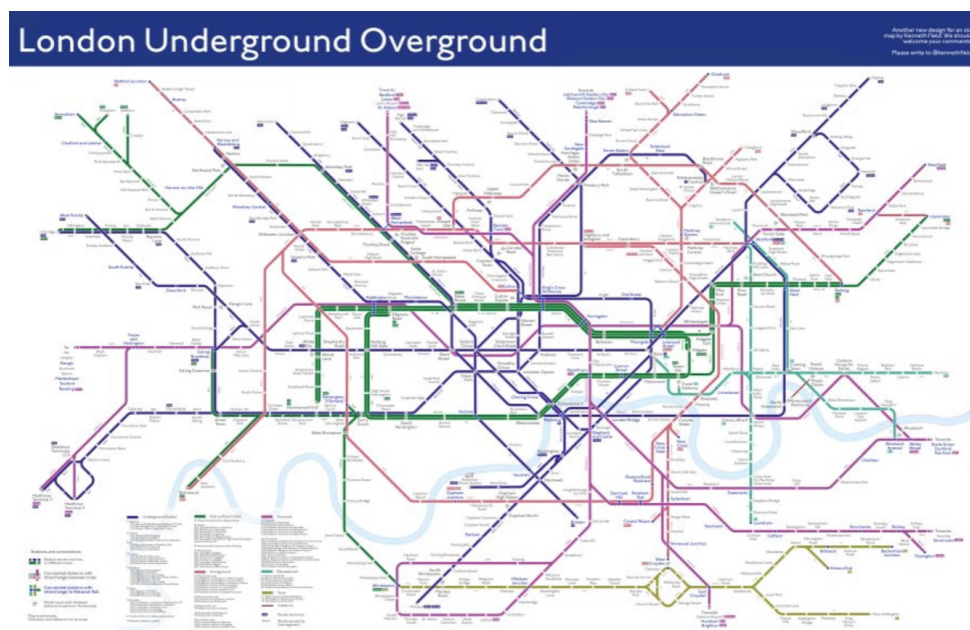


Figure 2. London Underground Overground with new colours and route detail

In summary, I've made a new pair of maps using a new design language that (I believe) better suits today's more congested network. I've made some contentious calls, particularly regarding the colours but it's still recognisable as London, and there remains strong nods to Beck's original. Whether you like my version, or one of numerous alternatives others have produced, any one of which is better than the current official map, it's time for a new map.

And let's not forget Harry Beck, in 1933 came up with a new design that was initially shunned, before it became a design classic so why not embrace a new map for London? More than anything, I think it's important to challenge maps that no longer suit their original purpose, and creating alternatives helps inform a wider discussion.

The two maps can be viewed in full:

<https://www.easzoom.com/imageaccess/899c8ea49be949698163934e2d1d7158>

<https://www.easzoom.com/imageaccess/7b9149d216c74675b6d0c487025493b9>