

Massimo Vignelli

The Designer's Life and Work

Focuses on their training, area of interest, clients, and professional life.

In-Depth

Looks at three different works and describes the form, meaning, and use.

Influence

Discusses who influenced him and who he influenced.

The Designer's Life and Work

Massimo Vignelli was an Italian designer most well-known for his work on the New York Subway system in the 1970s, United States National Parks Service, and companies like American Airlines and Bloomingdales. Born in 1931, Vignelli grew up in Milan, Italy. As a student, he studied architecture at Politecnico di Milano and Università di Architettura, Venice. As part of his studies, he visited America from 1957 to 1960. It was in 1966 that he returned to New York to start the branch of Unimark International.

Unimark was founded in 1965 by several partners, including Bob Noorda, Ralph Eckerstrom, James K. Fogleman, and Massimo himself. Unimark was unique in their sense of regimented design. They believed that design could be a system and rejected individuality



Figure 1: Massimo Vignelli and Unimark's designs for Knoll

within design itself. One of the best examples of the graphic design excellence created under this system was the Knoll program. Directed by Vignelli, the program created set the standards for the furniture industry's graphics for years to come (Figure 1). The basic tool that made Unimark's designs so great was a grid which standardized the graphic communications for many of their clients. As long as the system and standards were followed, their designs were visually foolproof. Unimark's clients included Ford Motor Company and Xerox.

However, all good things must come to an end. In the early 70s during the recession, the New York branch of Unimark was shut down. Learning from his time with them, Massimo and Lella Vignelli founded their own design firm, Vignelli Associates. Although he still used a strong grid and emphasized objective communication, the firm branched out and limited its type choices to Bodoni, Century, Futura, Garamond, and Times Roman.

One of the last projects Massimo worked on during his time at Unimark was updating the New York City Subway system (Figure 2). In the 1960s, the

Subway was an absolute mess. There was mismatched signage and a system with no pattern or logic. The user experience was extremely flawed and with the popularity of graphic design standards and corporate identity, the New York City Transit Authority (now the MTA) decided it was time for an overhaul. After years of research and actually spending time down in the Subway, Unimark was ready to begin the process of redesigning the beast. Massimo and Bob Noorda looked to create the best user experience possible by providing the least amount of information needed along the way.

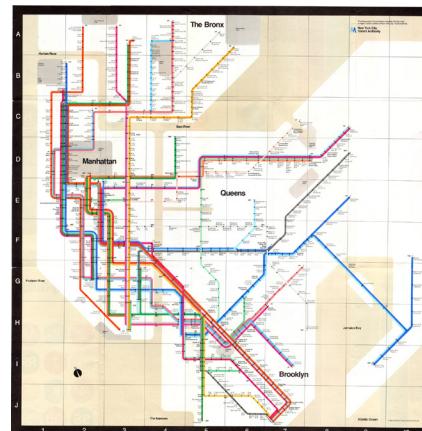


Figure 2: The New York Subway System map, 1972.

As part of the Design Improvement Program, Vignelli Associates was able to work with the United States National Parks Service to help them organize their information. This led to the development of the Unigrid (Figure 3) which organized hundreds of informational folders and booklets used in the over 300 national park locations in the United States. The grid was used to organize the layout and coordinate all

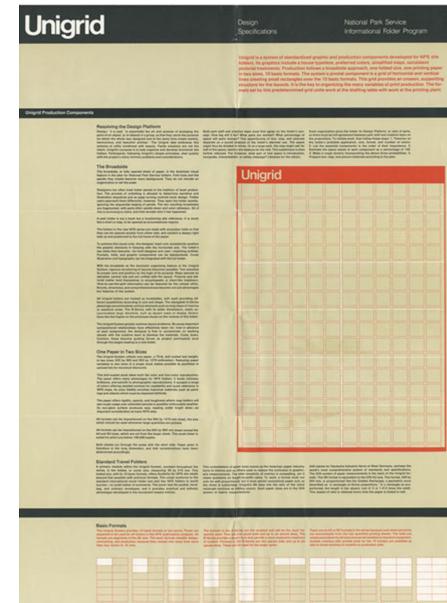


Figure 3: The Unigrid System

the designs for the parks. The typography was strictly to be Helvetica and Times Roman in a few sizes and weights.

Another design of Vignelli Associates that continues to live on is the Bloomingdale's logo (Figure 4) and the brown-bag system. Even though brown-bags are made of simple paper and are a relative commodity, Bloomingdales' bags carry a certain elegance. Introduced in 1973, these bags have a timeless feel to them and have survived 40 years of fads and styles.

During his time as a designer Vignelli worked with American Airlines (Figure 5 and 6) as well. He created the logo to be half red, half blue typeset in Helvetica. This played to their professional attitude as a company and their American roots. After being used for nearly 45 years, American Airlines updated their design.



Figure 5: American Airlines Annual Report, 1969.



Figure 4: The Bloomingdale's logo (inverted).

The new design was not well-received by many, even Vignelli agreed that there was no need for the change.

Over the course of his lifetime, Vigenelli saw the transition to the digital age. However, he was a not a huge fan of how easy designing and creating fonts was. Vignelli said that "...in the new computer age, the proliferation of typefaces and type manipulation represents a new level of visual pollution threatening our culture. Out of thousands of typefaces, all we need are a few basic ones, and trash the rest" (Jubert).

Considering Massimo Vignelli spent



Figure 6: General American Airlines marketing material

almost of all of his design years with a restricted type palette, this opinion is unsurprising.

During his life, Massimo Vignelli was able to create a wide breadth of work, not just in graphic design, but in other art fields like furniture and homeware design. He was able to conquer New York and have his designs be seen all around the city. As Michael Bierut said "...it seemed to me that the whole city of New York

was a permanent Vignelli exhibition [around 1981]. To get to the office, I rode in a subway with Vignelli-designed signage, shared the sidewalk with people holding Vignelli-designed Bloomingdale's shopping bags, walked by St. Peter's Church with its Vignelli-designed pipe organ (Figure 7) visible through the window. At Vignelli Associates, at 23 years old, I felt I was at the center of the universe."



Figure 7: Pipe Organ in St. Peter's Church

“ I learned how to design at design school. But I learned how to be a designer from Massimo Vignelli.”

Michael Bierut

Influence

Giovanni Pintori influenced Massimo Vignelli with his cohesive and modern branding for Olivetti.

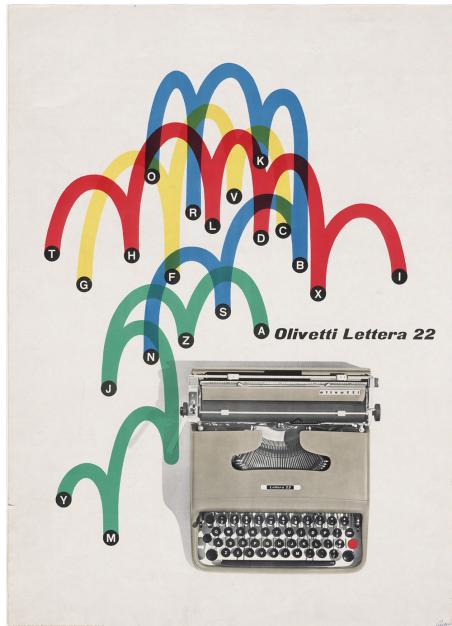
Max Huber introduced Vignelli to the rigors of Swiss typography and was crucial in forging his interest in design.

Michael Bierut worked with Massimo at Vignelli Associates. Starting at the bottom, he stayed for a decade and learned how to be a designer.

Who Influenced Him

Giovanni Pintori

During his time working at Olivetti, Pintori was able to create a cohesive and modern branding for the company. He made a standard office tool, the typewriter, highly desirable with his designs. His art-directed branding would influence those like Paul Rand and Massimo Vignelli who looked to create commercial branding that looked like it all belonged together.



Giovanni Pintori, Olivetti Lettera 22 portable typewriter poster, 1962



Giovanni Pintori, Olivetti Lexikon poster, 1952

Max Huber

The influence of Swiss design and typography is clear in Vignelli's work. Vignelli himself stated Max Huber, the Swiss designer, was a key in forging his interest in design. He learned about typography, grids, color, and vitality for Huber. Vignelli learned more from his predecessors and colleagues than he did in school.



Max Huber, Gran premio dell' Autodromo Monza, 1948

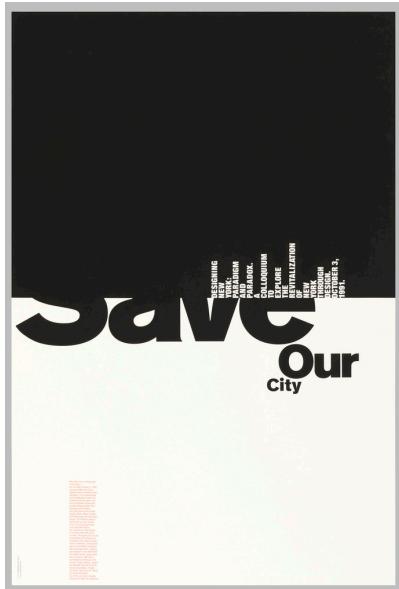


Max Huber, Olivetti Promotional poster

Who He Influenced

Michael Bierut

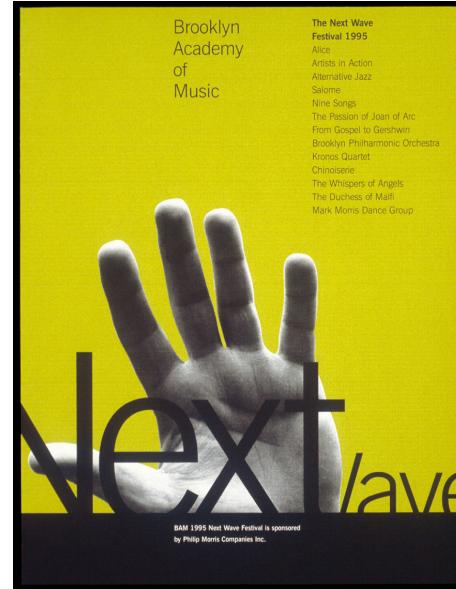
After graduating from college, Michael Bierut took a job at Vignelli Associates. Even though he started at the bottom, Vignelli always treated him with respect. Bierut only planned to stay for 18 months, but ended up staying 10 years due to his love for the job. Vignelli taught him about typography, scale, pacing, and refinement. From Vignelli, Bierut learned that design was a way to create a lasting experience.



Michael Bierut, New York Committee's Save Our City poster, 1991



Michael Bierut, Yale School of Architecture Lecture poster, 2011



Michael Bierut, Brooklyn Academy of Music poster, 1995



Michael Bierut, Mastercard Visual Identity, 2016

“ I like design to be semantically correct, syntactically consistent, and pragmatically understandable.

I like it to be visually powerful, intellectually elegant, and above all timeless.”

Massimo Vigenelli

In-Depth

The Unigrid System for the National Parks Service, 1977

New York City Subway System for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, early 1970s

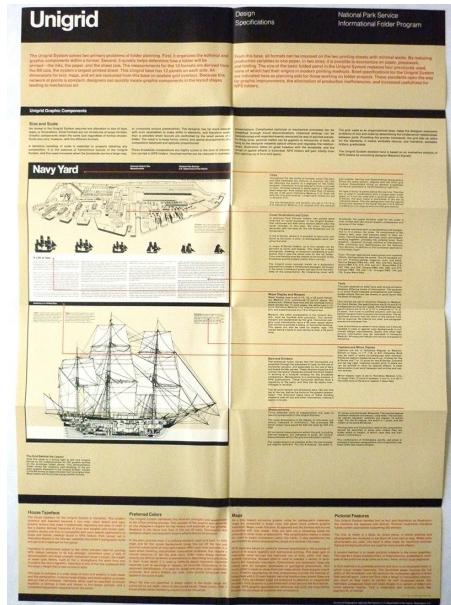
Super Bowl XLVII Map for the Metropolitan Transit Authority and New Jersey Transit, 2014

The Unigrid System

In 1977 Massimo Vignelli overhauled the National Parks Service system for creating print material. He designed the Unigrid system which created a unified and simpler way for the NPS to create the materials needed for their many parks. It solves two significant problems that National Parks Service faced, organizing the graphic and editorial components and how the material would be printed.

The system changed the four possible page sizes to just two and specified font sizes and suggested positions for all the different elements. This grid system could be used for summary presentations and visual demonstrations. The pictures could be huge or small, depending on what was needed. The grid was an organizational base that made all of the National Parks Service print material predictable and uniform. The system determined the scale and size by setting up ratios, therefore providing fundamental relationships between the different elements.

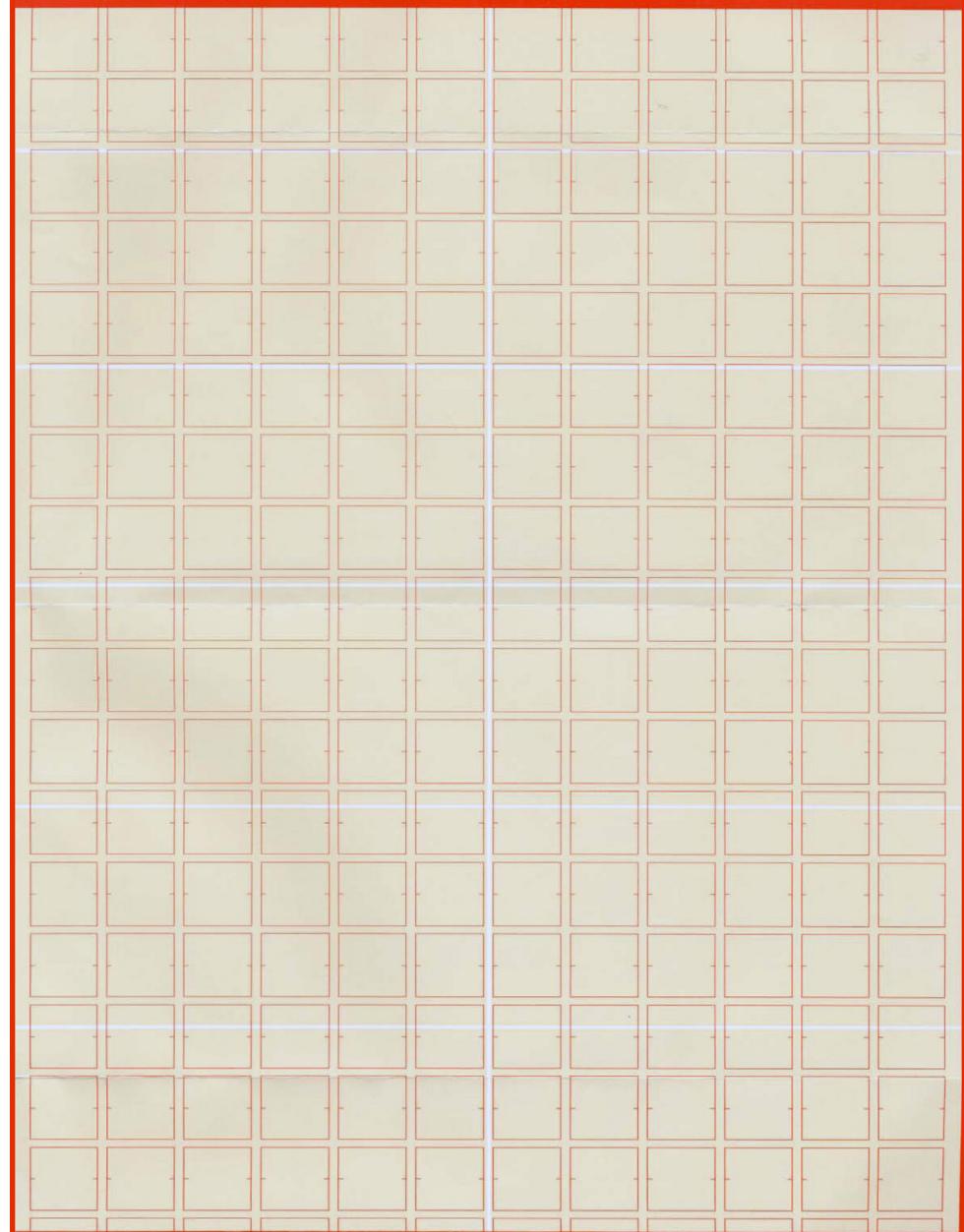
Massimo Vignelli provided analysis on each part of the materials so designers from across the United States could make them look uniform. He specified where text should hang, how large it should be, the leading, and the fonts themselves.



Poster explaining the Unigrid system, designed by Vignelli.

The typeface for their materials was Helvetica. Vignelli choose this typeface because it was clean, aesthetically pleasing, and easy to read. He also choose it because it was easy to print with the offset process. Vignelli wanted to make sure that his way of designing would also work for the means and materials used in the offset printing process.

Unigrid



New York City Subway System

Before the 1970s, the New York City Subway system was a mess. It was a horrible user experience full of confusing signage with no true pattern or logic. With the uprising of branding and design standards, it became clear to everyone that an overhaul was necessary. A new visual identity and navigation system needed to be developed to make the 'city that never sleeps' easy to navigate.

Massimo Vignelli and Bob Noorda were handed the monumental challenge of making the New York City Subway system understandable to the millions who visit and live in New York. Although a great challenge, the redesign became one of their most memorable projects. Since the system was in such disarray, the two scrapped everything and started fresh. They headed underground to research and learn the system in which they needed to make understandable.

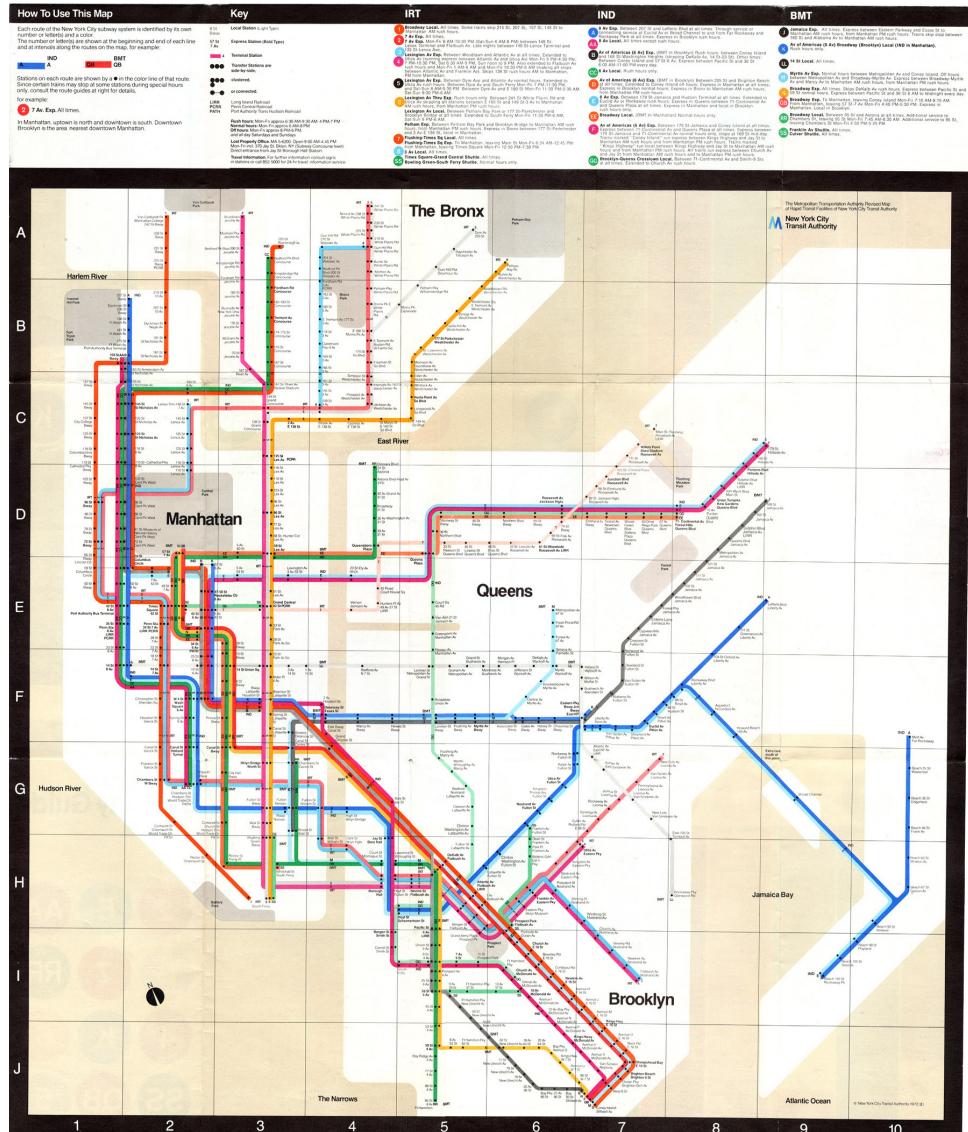
Their hard work culminated with the 'Graphics Standards Manual' where all things design related were explained. Not even the letter spacing was left up to the sign maker, the book specified the appropriate amount of spacing between the letters of the names of the stations.

The signs Vignelli and Noorda created are still similar to those seen today, the only difference is that the colors are reversed. Originally the signs were white with black type, today the signs are black with white type.

With the redesign of the underground system came the redesign of the map. Spearheaded by Vignelli, the map was received with mix reactions. Vignelli ignored the above-ground elements in order to make the subway lines more understandable. While not geographically accurate, Vigenelli's map was easier to look at and could be understood by both native New Yorkers and tourists.



NYC Transit Authority Graphic Standard Manual as designed by Vignelli



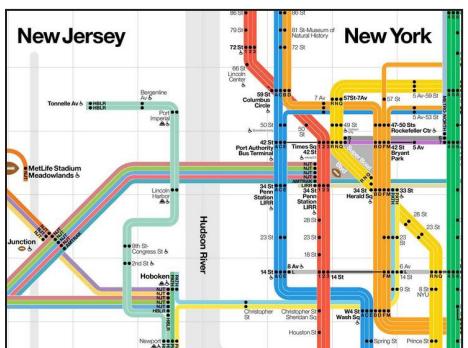
Super Bowl XLVII Map

The last map that Vignelli was involved in was the map for the 2014 Super Bowl at MetLife Stadium in New Jersey. The map was designed by Yoshiki Waterhouse at Vignelli Associates. In order to get people from the NY/NJ area to the event, the MTA partnered with New Jersey Transit, Amtrak, and NY Waterway to produce a special Regional Transit map which would include all of these modes of transport. With no private cars allowed at the stadium, there was a huge push for the public to use mass transportation.

This was the first time an MTA map included both New York and New Jersey. All forms of transit were shown in the consistent visual language developed by Vignelli. Another first for this map was the fact that a Vignelli map included topographic features like MetLife Stadium and Super Bowl Boulevard.

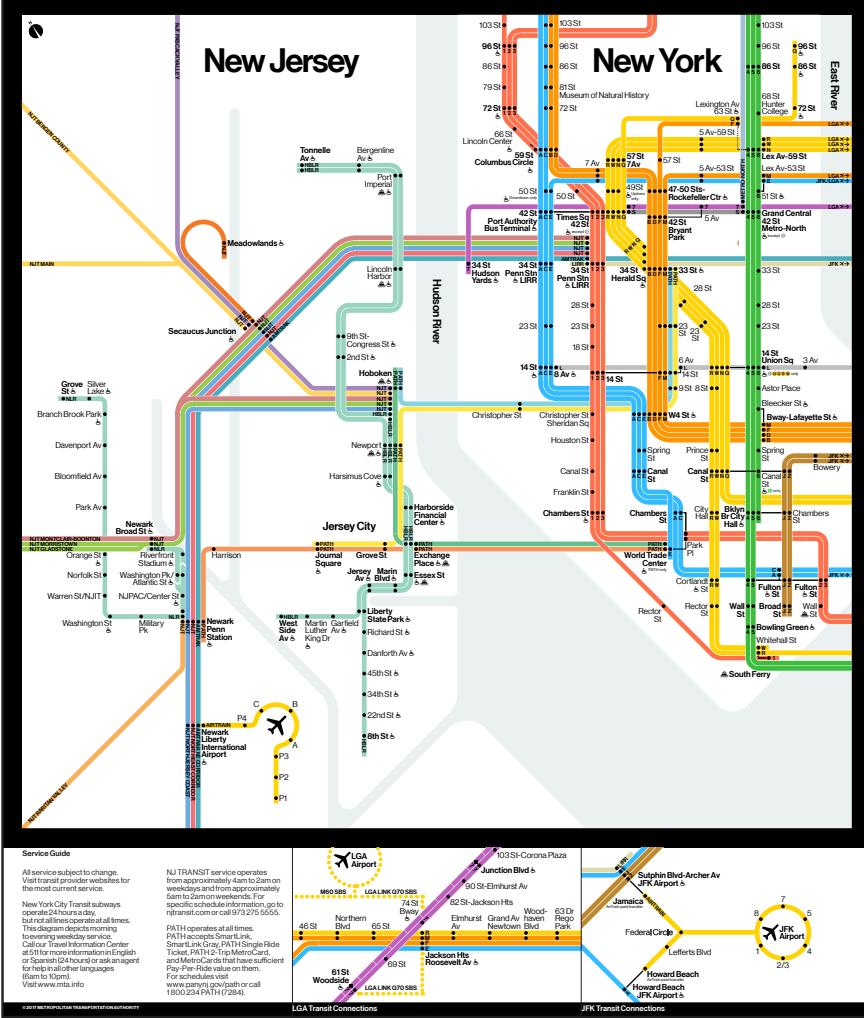
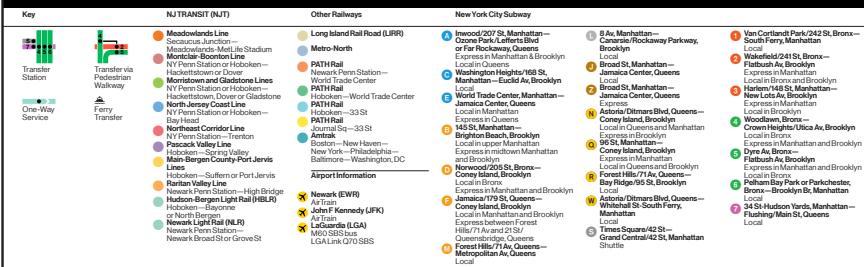
In order to reach as many people as possible, this map was produced online, in mobile apps, and in print. With over 400,000 people expected to attend game-related events, it was important that the map was understandable and accessible. The map manages to simplify the complicated system of travelling to and from New York and New Jersey.

This map is also one Massimo Vignelli's last projects, as the artist died later that year.



Detail shot of the Regional Transit Diagram, focusing in on two of the routes from New York to New Jersey.

Regional Transit Diagram



This book is typeset in Helvetica and Helvetica Bold, designed by Max Miedinger in 1957.

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