

An Interview with Massimo Vignelli

R. Roger Remington

Your New York subway diagram (1970, in use until 1979) has had a revival – how did this happen?

In 2008 we were asked to design a new version, in a limited edition print for a Men's Vogue benefit. The New York transit authority then approached us to apply it in 'The Weekender' section of its website. The diagram [provides] subway users with an interactive way of getting important information about, for example, what lines are working and which ones are out of service.

There are also discussions under way about adopting the new diagram as the central visual element in consumer products such as T-shirts, plates, cups, and other New York souvenir items. So the diagram is evolving into a central identity element for the transit authority.

‘I was always seeking to affect the lives of millions of people – not through politics or entertainment but through design. I strive to raise the bar a few inches, taking the commonplace and improving it.’

What's on your mind this morning?

The centre is the most powerful position. Intuitively, I have been aware of this for a long time. When I look back at my earliest graphic design piece, this book cover has its title running across the centre of the format. Then when I compare this to a recent book I designed on the architecture of my friend Richard Meier, his name also runs right across the centre of the book cover.

This view works in other critical areas as well; for instance, one could say that the most effective design is positioned in the centre between progressiveness and conservatism. Our Vignelli standard colour is positioned in the middle between red and orange. There is a timelessness to this notion of balance, and timelessness has always been an important priority for me.



What do you think of the use of “information design” as a label for graphic design?

We have been using this term a lot. We even use it to define ourselves, because of the confusion about being a graphic designer or a graphic artist. We've been using the term information architecture, because it definitely places the accent on the structural side rather than the pictorial side of visual communication. We call ourselves graphic designers and some people understand. That's hopeful but the terminology of information design is a mouthful of hopefulness!

We want to make it clear that we are not commercial artists, illustrators or advertising designers. We are information architects who structure information. Like architecture, what we do is not only structural but it is also appearance and visual form.

“Information design” has been appropriated by those who specialise in making diagrams. However, much more is involved than just doing diagrams or books about health, hospitals and sports. What we do is really structural in presenting information in a way that's more understandable than any other form.

Graphic designers today are changing because of the computer. They all work with a digital technology so they are really switching more and more towards information architecture. If you still want to call it graphic design, that is fine with me.

