London's Underground:
How Visual Signs Communicate Urban Identity

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Union jack! Underground! Double-decker bus! Big Ben! Has London come to mind yet? The rise of visual and media culture in the 20th and 21st Century has transformed visual signs into a universal language of communication. In every city, we are endlessly bombarded by words and images that inform our perception—road signs dictate how we move, advertisements influence what we consume, and corporate logos change how we regard certain products. Visual language is coded; we as individuals did not create these mental associations, yet we are subjected to them. By imagining a bright-red roundel, a classic-blue box, and simple white lettering, the idea of London pops into our minds. Can basic graphic elements, a logo and a typeface, embody the identity of an entire city? If so, what are the mental associations that communicate an urban identity, and how have we learned to interpret them visually?

This paper will deconstruct the meaning and demonstrate the capacity of visual signs using the example of the London Underground's visual identity, a logo and typeface which have endured since their creation more than a hundred years ago, becoming postcard-worthy icons of their native city along the way. This journey began in 1916, when Edward Johnston created a roundel logo (see *Figure 1[1]*) and a typeface called Johnston Sans (see *Figure 2[2]*) as a commision from London's Underground railway. The corporation hoped to consolidate their image in order

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[1] Johnston, *London Underground Roundel*.
[2] Johnston, *Specimen Of the typeface Johnston*.

to be visually easy to navigate and to thus, drive up fare income,[3] as it had recently merged with a number of different companies.[4] Hand-drawn and first used as wood-block prints, the Johnston Sans typeface was inspired by Roman capital letters of the Trajan's military victory column in Rome to be simple and easily readable. To achieve this end, Johnston applied equal proportions to the letters and decided against serifs, the decorative ends of strokes, in a time when the opposite style, Victorian handwriting, was all the rage.[5] Thus, it was one of the first widely used sans serif typefaces, although its public licensing has caused the work of Johnston's pupil, Gill Sans, to be better known today.[6] Both of Johnston's creations are considered to be "one of the most widely accepted mental images of the city"[7] and a "design which screams 'London!', no matter which language you speak."[8] They work together to form an urban graphic object,[9] a visual representation of a mental concept that employs graphic elements and functions in an urban environment.

Figure 1: Underground roundel logo

Figure 2: Johnston Sans sample

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[3] Harvey, "'London's Handwriting' by Colin Banks (Book Review)."
[4] Damon, "The Typeface That Prompted a Small Revolution."
[5] Wilson, "A Hundred Years of Johnston – the Iconic Typeface of the London Underground."
[6] Damon, "The Typeface That Prompted a Small Revolution."
[7] Forty, *Objects of Desire*.
[8] Wilson, "A Hundred Years of Johnston."
[9] Harland, "Graphic Objects and Their Contribution to the Image of the City," 373.

Visual language, like English or French, can be analyzed linguistically as a system of signs and judged by its ability to convey meaning. In the early 20th Century, Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguistics professor, developed the study of semiotics—examining the construction of meaning through a language's patterns as opposed to its history. By his definition, language is composed of signs, in which a sign is the synthesis of the "signified," a mental concept (e.g. an apple), and the "signifier," a vessel (e.g. the word 'apple'). In the case of words, alphabet letters act as individual signs that each produce a unique sound. The letters, however, do not convey much meaning individually; they become meaningful through their relationship with the letters around them to create a word. Whereas Saussurean semiotics focus on the way alphabet letters form words as a substitute for mental images, the same principle can be applied to graphic, and even typographic, elements forming legible images. Because visual language, like any spoken language is a pattern, it needs an equivalent to recognizable alphabet letters, or "what cognitive scientists refer to as 'defining properties.'"[10] Graphically, the Underground logo uses three such properties: the roundel shape, the red-and-blue color scheme, and the look of Johnston Sans. These individually convey general ideas of shape, color, and typographic design, but only collectively represents the idea of the Underground. The composition and arrangement of not only the Underground logo, but also the thousands of advertisements we see every day, are carefully composed and purposefully calculated with meaning.

Typography is a form of visual communication in its own right; although the word 'Underground' is used in the logo, the mental concept of the London Underground is developed

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[10] Harland, "Graphic Objects," 388.

more from the word's appearance than its dictionary definition. There are two distinct meanings at play in Johnston Sans: the 'word image,' combines alphabet letters to generate linguistic meaning that can serve an informative purpose, like warning passengers of danger ("Mind the gap!") or announcing station names ("Piccadilly Circus"). On the other hand, the 'typographic image,'[11] uses the same fundamental visual qualities of photography and graphic design—namely, line and form, light and color, and composition—to elicit emotional and psychological responses.[12] Because Johnston Sans emerged among the popularity of decorative handwritten typefaces, its easily readable letters and equal spacing gave off an impression of neutrality and thus, reliability. Its legibility served the function to inform without attracting any unnecessary attention, making readers view the intention of its corporation as purely informative with no ulterior motive. As legendary graphic designer Paula Scher explains, "Typography can create immense power. You're working with things that create character. You're working with weight. You're working with height. If you take an E, and the middle bar is the same length as the ends of the E's, it feels different than if the little bar is half the length of the E's."[13] Just by playing around with the strokes of a typeface, the emotional reception and the general perception of the text changes even before the viewer has a chance to read the words. Typography, therefore, can be thought of as dress, "an outer shell and a designable surface that is removable from the linguistics of a text."[14] Thus, what the dress of a typeface visually communicates should be cohesive with what the typed words linguistically communicate.

[11] van Leeuwen, "Towards a Semiotics of Typography," 142.
[12] Broden, "Image, Sign, Identity: Jean-Marie Floch and Visual Semiotics," 289.
[13] Press. *Abstract: The Art of Design.* "Paula Scher: Graphic Design."
[14] Stöckl, "Typography," 205.

It does little good for the graphic sign to operate on its own; it must operate in relation to a whole system of signs, their culture, and their history. Saussure describes the relationship between the signifier and the signified to be either iconic, in which the signifier physically resembles the signified (e.g. the roundel logo representing a metro sign at Westminster station), or arbitrary (e.g. the roundel logo representing the London's transport system or even London). Most cases are arbitrary, but as long as a group of people, or a 'linguistic community,' agree to use of signs, the language of signs will exist.[15] People understand that the roundel and the Johnston Sans typeface represent the transportation system in London because the London Underground Group, the company in possession of London's railways, decided it to be so in 1916 and because the public adapted to its use as it was implemented in the 1920s and 1930s.[16] In other words, there is no graphic reason for the roundel to denote transportation (but it does!).

Because any language of signs is used by a specific community, signs can use the community's shared cultural background to layer their meaning. In fact, Charles Sanders Pierce, an American philosopher known to have developed semiotic study at the same time as Saussure, puts more emphasis on the relationship between the sign and its reader, whom he calls the interpretant. He sees the act of transferring meaning as an active triangular process, in which the interpretant's pre-existing knowledge acts as a step in an on-going chain of associations, called unlimited semiosis (see *Figure 4[17]*).[18] To illustrate this psychological process, if there is a cat to be named Yojo, the naming of the cat and the physical cat would fuse into one sign in the first step in unlimited semiosis. Now, with the connotation of the cat's name, the new sign can be

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[15] Crow, *Visible Signs,* 100.
[16] "Edward Johnston - London Transport Museum."
[17] Sowa, John F. *Signs and Reality*. 2015.
[18] Crow, *Visible Signs*, 32-57.

attached to graphic representations of the cat, such as a

drawing or a photograph, in the second step. The same

concept can be extended to typographic signs: "Any new

graphic design will be created and interpreted against the

background of what users of typography know about the

code and its meanings, at the same time extending and

enhancing typographic resources."[19] The Underground's
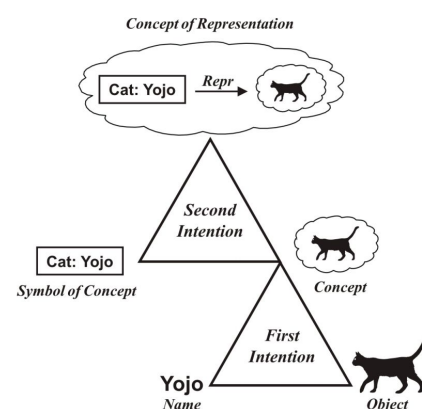
graphic and typographic signage is so easily recognizable

Figure 4: Pierce's unlimited semiosis

because it incorporated the history of London through the choice of color and it layers

associations in the present day thanks to pop culture references. The roundel's red color

represents and has actually represented London for twenty years before the official use of the

roundel logo. Known as Pantone 485 C, this shade of red paints double-decker buses and is used

by the Royal Mail, the primary UK postal service and courier company.[20] It all started in

1907—until then, buses running throughout London were owned by different companies and

painted different colors to visually separate their routes. However, the London General Omnibus

Company started overtaking other companies and painting their buses only red to stand out from

competitors. They used numbers to differentiate bus routes instead.[21] Ever since, this red has

been seen all over London, the London Underground symbol largely contributing to this

phenomenon. The history and recognizability of this color allowed the Underground Group to

represent a part of London's identity. Consequently, over time, the London Underground was

referenced again and again in film and television, art, music, literature, and advertisements:

[19] Stöckl, "Typography," 213.
[20] Romeo, "Why London Buses Are Red."
[21] Romeo, "Why London Buses Are Red."

"People associate the Roundel with their time in London, and from that cultural association, it has moved into an entire network of counterculture uses and appropriations."[22] In 1938, Man

-KEEPS LONDON GOING

Figure 5: Man Ray

Ray, an American Dadaist visual artist, created a poster featuring the roundel symbol as a flying spatial object (see Figure 5[23]).[24] Throughout the 20th and 21st Century, numerous authors mentioned the Underground and used it as a setting in their fictional novels. In *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone,* Albus Dumbledore says, "I have one (a scar) myself above my left knee that is a perfect map of the London Underground."[25] The various pop culture references of not only the roundel logo, but also the physical place itself allows the public to form stronger associations with the Underground and connect it back to its visual identity. As a result, posters borrowing its visuals (see *Figure 6[26])* are immediately referenced back to the Underground, even unofficial ones (see *Figure 7[27]).* Because all "visual codes constitute a grammar…[that is] culturally defined and shared by people with common experiences and language,[28] visual signs can manipulate social and cultural connotations to convey abstract ideas, such as identity, or to create abstract expressions, such as irony.

[22] Brownlee, "The Amazing History."
[23] Ray, 1938.
[24] Vincent, "The London Underground: 150 Years In Culture."
[25] Rowling, *Harry Potter And the Sorcerer's Stone.*
[26] Transport for London, 2015.
[27] Elvis Communications, 2012.
[28] Davis and Hunt, *Bloomsbury Applied Visual Arts - Visual Communication Design, 33.*

Figure 6: Transport for London poster   *Figure 7: Fake Campaign by Elvis Communications*

As a city is the sum of a space and its inhabitants, a graphic sign can become inseparable from its urban environment when it appears ubiquitously in the space and informs the inhabitants how to move around it. In all cities, graphic and typographic design is inescapable: "It's part of everyday life. It's not an art form that is in some other place. It's in the street, it's on the shelf at the supermarket."[29] Its consistent and unified use on posters, billboards, and banners forces people to encounter and interact with it as much as man-holes, streetlights, and buildings. This physical interrelation pushes people "to situate graphic objects as distinct products that may be understood alongside the products of architecture, landscape architecture, city planning, and civil engineering."[30] Signs have successfully melted into the physical landscape of cities, thus becoming mentally associated with a geographic location. However, in the case of the London Underground, people's primary mental association to it comes from its communication of how to

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[29] Press. *Abstract: The Art of Design.* "Paula Scher: Graphic Design."
[30] Harland, "Graphic Objects," 371.

navigate the city. In the *Journal of Urban Design,* Robret Harland argues that graphic design and urban design are fundamentally similar in that they both communicate essential information and represent people's relationship and interaction with their environment.[31] Just as urban design seeks to organize and guide a space through the creation of groups of buildings, streets, and districts, graphic design creates house numbers, street signs, and maps. In like manner, the Underground's graphic system directs public transportation, which renders it integral to the legibility and the experience of London: "It is the 'voice' which helps people to get around—a comforting familiar presence amid the chaos of the morning commute…" [32] In addition, Johnston Sans was used for wayfinding at the London 2012 Summer Olympics, a significant event boosting the city's public image and community morale, an example of "event identity [contributing] to London's environmental image."[33] As a result, Johnston's logo and typeface can equate to the identity of London because its widespread physicality and navigational use makes you feel like you are geographically in and travelling through the city just by looking at it.

Unfortunately, the world that we live in is full of coded systems which are layered on top of each other. Nonetheless, no matter how complex, these systems can be taken apart and their inner-workings can be understood. In the example of the London Underground's logo and typeface, their efficacy as sign stemmed from being functional within the linguistic system, recognizable within a cultural system, and omnipresent within an urban system. What makes a graphic sign so successful? Sign systems are socially constructed and therefore, they must be

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[31] Harland, "Graphic Objects," 368.
[32] Wilson, "A Hundred Years of Johnston."
[33] Harland, "Graphic Objects," 381.

humanist. They must be geared toward human use, concerned with human satisfaction, and centered around human issues in order to appeal to the only factor determining a system's survival: a willing linguistic community. What is good design? Good design uses signs that represent not only an idea, but also the relationship human beings have with it.

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