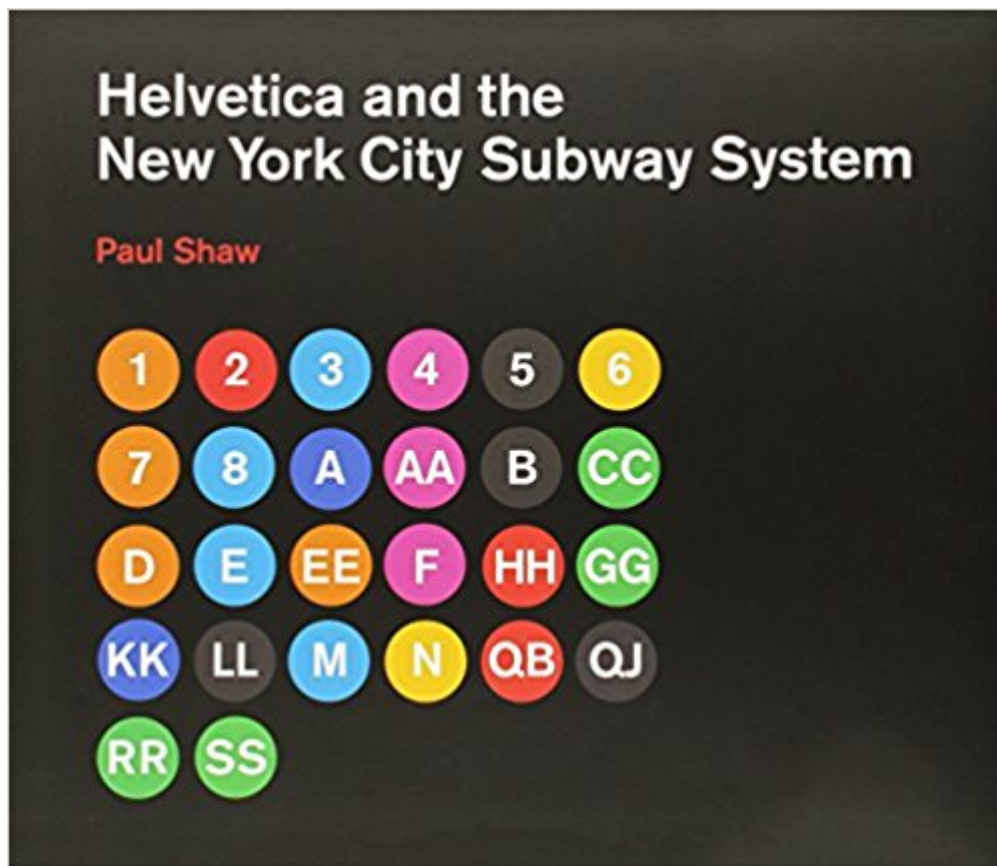




The book was found

Helvetica And The New York City Subway System: The True (Maybe) Story (MIT Press)



Synopsis

For years, the signs in the New York City subway system were a bewildering hodge-podge of lettering styles, sizes, shapes, materials, colors, and messages. The original mosaics (dating from as early as 1904), displaying a variety of serif and sans serif letters and decorative elements, were supplemented by signs in terracotta and cut stone. Over the years, enamel signs identifying stations and warning riders not to spit, smoke, or cross the tracks were added to the mix. Efforts to untangle this visual mess began in the mid-1960s, when the city transit authority hired the design firm Unimark International to create a clear and consistent sign system. We can see the results today in the white-on-black signs throughout the subway system, displaying station names, directions, and instructions in crisp Helvetica. This book tells the story of how typographic order triumphed over chaos. The process didn't go smoothly or quickly. At one point New York Times architecture writer Paul Goldberger declared that the signs were so confusing one almost wished that they weren't there at all. Legend has it that Helvetica came in and vanquished the competition. Paul Shaw shows that it didn't happen that way -- that, in fact, for various reasons (expense, the limitations of the transit authority sign shop), the typeface overhaul of the 1960s began not with Helvetica but with its forebear, Standard (AKA Akzidenz Grotesk). It wasn't until the 1980s and 1990s that Helvetica became ubiquitous. Shaw describes the slow typographic changeover (supplementing his text with more than 250 images -- photographs, sketches, type samples, and documents). He places this signage evolution in the context of the history of the New York City subway system, of 1960s transportation signage, of Unimark International, and of Helvetica itself.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The book is a must read for sign nuts, design nuts, transit nuts, and all true lovers of New York. (Julia Turner Slate)A concise history of the New York subway, a visual archive of century's worth of underground signs (some of which are still in use), and an impressive study of the conflict between the purity of design and the messiness of the real world. (The Wilson Quarterly)[D]esign projects are rarely tidy; they're much likelier to be muddled, chaotic, and to be determined by flukes, gaffes and compromises as much as forethought. It's always refreshing to come across an unexpurgated account of the messy reality, and the American design historian Paul Shaw has produced a particularly thoughtful and engaging example in his new book, *Helvetica and the New York City Subway System*. (Alice Rawsthorn *The New York Times*)Mr. Shaw makes clear in one of the best-researched books on modern design to date, this most New York of places is today a realm dominated by a Swiss typeface specified by a pair of Italian designers. There isn't better testimony to the city as a melting pot or to the strange turns that any major design project inevitably takes. (The Wall Street Journal)For transit and type nerds alike, Paul's book is the Bible. It finally tells the true story of the New York subway sign system and shows how even big projects like it are shaped by people and their likes and dislikes; by accidents, prejudice, and half-knowledge. This is a history book, a type book, a design book, and a business book. (Erik Spiekermann, creative director and managing partner, Edenspiekermann)Paul Shaw's detailed narrative of the evolution of signage in the New York City subway system over the past half-century reveals how the many decisions underlying its appearance have been shaped as much by political, economic, and bureaucratic forces as by design considerations. His beautifully illustrated book brings a unique perspective to the subject, and is a welcome addition to the vast literature on New York City. (Kenneth T. Jackson, Editor-in-Chief, *The Encyclopedia of New York City*; President Emeritus, The New-York Historical Society)Paul Shaw's story of the New York subway sign system is an amazing piece of research. While Helvetica vs. Standard is the book's main focus, the most intriguing part of the story has to with the decisions and personalities involved. Shaw wonderfully captures the complexity of the undertaking, and shows how the persistence of a few people dedicated to expanding and improving the system over many years had a great impact. (Tom Geismar, founding partner, Chermayeff & Geismar)Paul Shaw's study of the signage in the New York subway system is one of the best

pieces of design history I've ever read. Impeccably researched and gracefully written, it uses a seemingly prosaic subject as a starting point for a fascinating exploration of the way that graphic design developed as a discipline in the 20th century. (Michael Bierut, partner, Pentagram)

Paul Shaw, an award-winning graphic designer, typographer, and calligrapher in New York City, teaches at Parsons School of Design and the School of Visual Arts. He is the coauthor of *Blackletter: Type and National Identity* and writes about letter design in the blog *Blue Pencil*. Paul Shaw, an award-winning graphic designer, typographer, and calligrapher in New York City, teaches at Parsons School of Design and the School of Visual Arts. He is the coauthor of *Blackletter: Type and National Identity* and writes about letter design in the blog *Blue Pencil*.

This book may easily fall into the category of "everything and more than you ever wanted to know" about the use of typeface or letter styles in the New York City Subway system. On the one hand, it is easy to dismiss this as simply a study of the evolution of a specific font. However, when considered in the overall context of the evolution of the subways of New York City into the current Metro system, it is clear that just like the MTA, what we see today in the signage is a fascinating history of designed plans, some political muscle and a good bit of coincidence. In a similar vein to those who study the rolling stock or expansion of the route of the NYC Subway over the years, a variety of people may find this book intriguing. People with interests in architecture, graphic design, marketing, history and/or the subway system itself should enjoy this book. It may get tedious partway through, since it tends to get bogged down in minute details. So, trust your instincts about your level of interest. As much as I love the NYC Subways, I would not buy an in-depth study of train engines and propulsion systems, since that's just not my thing. However, if signage as artwork IS your thing, you ought to get this book!

Most often, books on design, present a lovely completed vision of the final product with all their flaws Photoshopped away like a centerfold image. Those of us who have tilted at windmills know the real story behind working with the quagmire of complex institutions. Paul Shaw has forsaken the "healing tool" in favor of a look at the design process, blemishes and all. He shows us battles lost as well as won. The New York Subway system did not begin life as a well orchestrated plan that was delivered as composed with a single downbeat. There were numerous conflagrations among the many involved factions from planners, designers, local governments, businesses, and unions. What we see today on a subway platform in NYC is a semi-peeled onion revealing layers of history. Paul

makes a fine story of the toils and shows images from all facets of the century-long project still in progress. He jokingly adds "maybe" after True Story in the subtitle but we all know such a story could not be invented. The book is a combination lesson in history, sociology, commerce, and 100 year turf-wars, the stuff real design projects are made of. My only small quibble with the book is that the layout can be a bit confusing to follow sometimes. This may be because there are so many intriguing illustrations and footnotes that you forget where you were reading. This is hardly a problem though, rereading is a pleasant task and you find things you never knew were there--kind of like repeated trips on the New York subway. By all means, take it for a ride or two.

Most books about the subway, deal with the history of the system and how it was built. This book focuses on something most of us neglect when we are down in the subway, its signs and placards. I discovered through this book that they have a history in itself that is as intriguing as its building. Must read for subway history buffs and graphic artists.

This is a fascinating story that combines two of my passions: New York City and typography. I highly recommend this book if you want to learn how all of the New York City subway signage was designed.

This is great book, especially for anyone with a design background! I would highly recommend!

Amazing book. A must-have for designers!

This was a great gift. It is well-presented, with gorgeous photos. Any font snob or Subway aficionado should have this on their bookshelf.

wonderful story.

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