

Is TTC signage in  
“a state of good repair”?

Joe Clark

2007-01-31



Designers long ago began pointing out that the TTC uses a jumble of typefaces, but even a casual visitor will notice indications that signage in the TTC has recently slipped to seriously dysfunctional levels. In some stations you come upon hand-lettered signs pasted on pillars by TTC employees: Obviously they've been hounded for directions by baffled riders, have given up waiting for assistance from the signmakers at head office and have taken matters into their own hands. Their sloppy signage makes the whole system look seedy, like a store that's about to go bankrupt.

That isn't an original quote from 2007. It's from *Toronto Life* in November 1994.<sup>1</sup>

Things couldn't still be that bad 13 years later, could they?

## What's the problem?

- Signage is one of the many things the TTC has neglected
- We have a treasure in our midst in the form of the unique font used on many subway-station walls. But all the other signs have been built up piecemeal
- Taken together, not only do the signs not match, they don't *communicate*

## Aren't the newer signs better?

- The TTC commissioned, installed, and tested a new signage system in 1994, which was then *ignored completely*
- To coincide with the Sheppard subway, TTC staff cooked up another new signage "design." It looks like a hazy memory of New York's subway signage, designed way back in 1966
  - ¶ Copying New York is a Toronto cliché, but it's even worse here. In the 40 years since Massimo Vignelli designed the New York signage, we've learned a lot more and the available fonts have improved
  - ¶ The Sheppard-style signs look fine to an untrained eye, but that's the only kind of eye they work for. If you're visually impaired or if the sign is illuminated, they're hard to read

## Are signs really that big a deal?

- Not yet, they aren't. While the TTC has had several serious and even fatal accidents, we haven't had happen to us what happened to Düsseldorf airport in 1997 – a fire in which people died because they couldn't find the exits
- Day to day, the mishmash of signs tells riders that the TTC doesn't think signage is important. It says shabbiness is OK – and that the TTC doesn't care

## Fonts are not decoration

- Typefaces are not a way to make words look pretty. Fonts have *performance characteristics*. Some typefaces work better than others for certain uses. And you can prove that by testing with readers
- The TTC uses too many fonts (usually fonts that came free with Windows software) and ignores the fact that typefaces *do things* and are not merely decorative

## If it doesn't run on wheels, it must be a frill

- It seems as though the TTC thinks it is impossible to do signage well – that the best we can manage is doing signage *well enough*
- “State of good repair” works well as a slogan, but it has to apply to more than just rolling stock
- The attitude is “I can read it, so it must be OK.” We aren't designing signage for *you*

## The good news first

The old subway signs, including the name of most stations and many directional signs in most stations, are beautiful, apparently functional, and a unique treasure. And they've been durable, lasting decades of daily use. So let's not touch those.

Now the bad news.



## **There are too many signs**

Not only are there too many signs in subway stations, sometimes overlapping or conflicting –





- a typical collector's booth has more than a dozen signs (as high as 17 in some cases).



Quick: Which sign do you read first?  
(Don't you just ignore all of them?)

## Signs are haphazard

Signs are posted pretty much at random, and there's no such thing as too many copies of the same sign.



## Nothing matches

Let's take it as a given that the old mid-century signs will stay. They won't match any newer signs. But that means there should really be two kinds of signs in the system – one old design and one new design.

In fact, there are probably a dozen kinds of signage in the system.

### *Recent and brand-new signs don't match*

The system has been built up piecemeal over time, and never under informed supervision. So you get subway stations that don't even use the old mid-century font, then also post a TTC ad, then also install garbage cans, all using different fonts and formats.





Even adjacent signs don't match.





*Fonts don't match, either*

One variation of this problem is typefaces. The TTC cannot match the fonts, or even the arrows, on adjacent subway pillars –



– or on two signs on opposite sides of the same platform.



(This isn't even the right font according to the TTC "sign manual." And they couldn't even get that incorrect font right – look at the g in the upper "George.")

## Attempted colour-coding doesn't work

Some signs have tiny lines in the colours of each subway branch (yellow, green, blue, and, for some reason, pink). The lines are so subtle they look like decoration or dividers of some kind.





*Bus and Wheel-Trans signs seem to be using colour-coding, too*

Does this sign mean the bus is on the red subway line?





Does this sign tell us that Wheel-Trans stops are on the blue subway line?



## You can't tell what's a sign and what's an ad

Intrusive advertising competes with signage –



– or overwhelms signage to the point where you can barely notice the sign.

COLLEGE

EXIT 

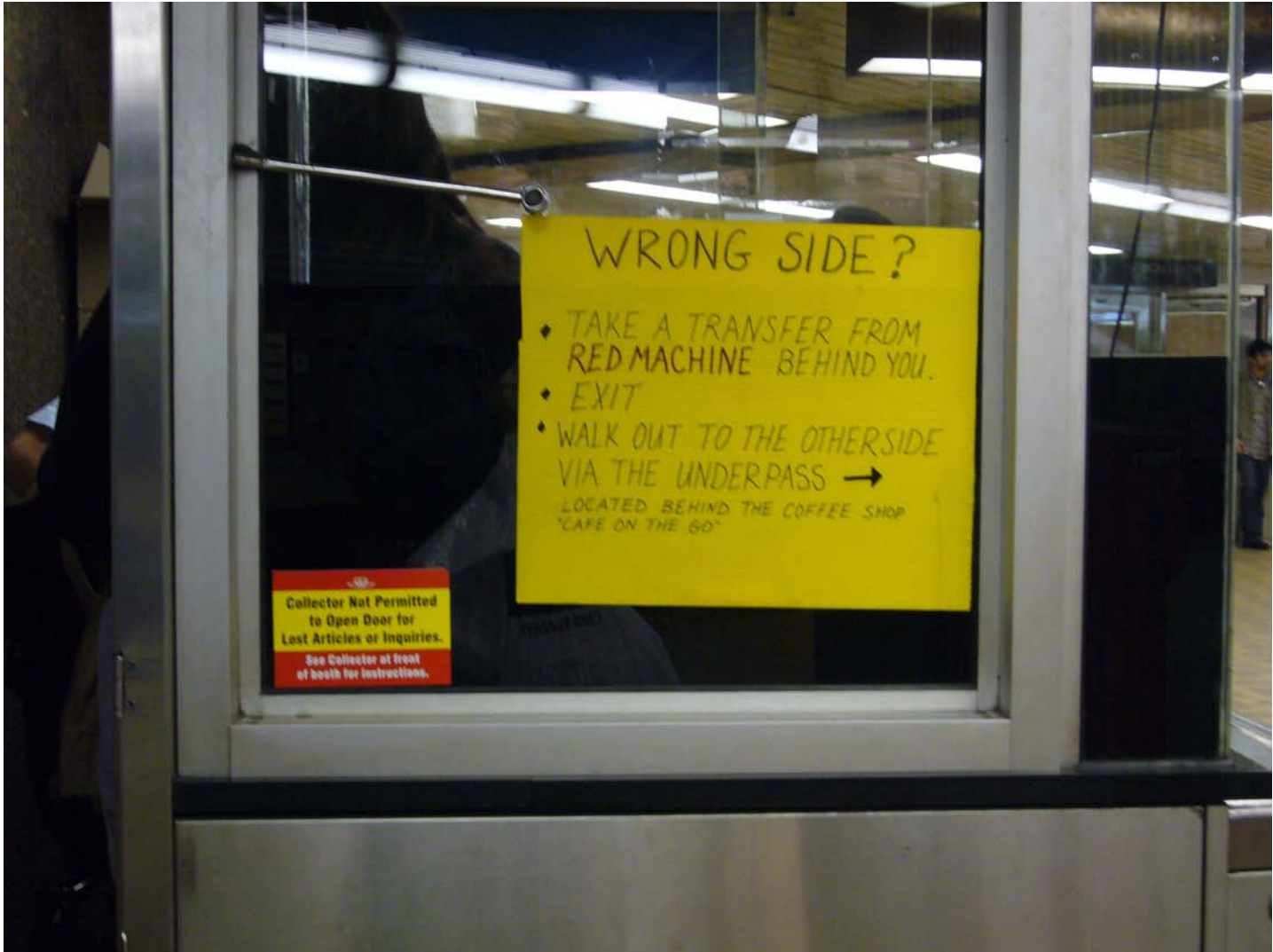
**AFRICA.**  
**AVAILABLE IN CANADA.**

## **There are too many handmade signs**

If TTC staff have to scribble out a sign on a piece of cardboard, then the whole system isn't working.

Would you really trust a handwritten sign?







## Signs are falling apart

Signs, especially handmade ones, get torn or damaged, but stay in place.

H107001 FACT01

# Customer Notice


 **7 / 310 Bathurst** 

**Temporary lane restrictions and route diversion**  
Effective November 6 to 20, 2006


On Monday, November 6, work will begin on the south side of the Bathurst Street & St. Clair Avenue intersection. This will result in traffic being reduced to one lane, in either direction, on Bathurst Street until Friday, November 10.

Starting 7:00 pm, Friday, November 10 until 6:00 am, Monday, November 13, **Bathurst Street will be closed** to northbound and southbound through traffic at St. Clair Avenue, during work on the north side of the intersection. 7/310 Bathurst buses will divert as shown (see map).

Starting Monday, November 13, the Bathurst & St. Clair intersection will re-open with single lane operation remaining in place until 6:00 am, Monday, November 20.



*Construction time lines and route diversions are subject to change due to weather conditions or any other unforeseen events.*

[www.ttc.ca](http://www.ttc.ca)  416-393-INFO

(The route diversion mentioned on this sign ended in November 2006. Many copies of that sign were still in place two months later.)

## Signs are too wordy and cluttered

There is no effort to reduce the words on a sign to a bare minimum. That's true for both temporary and permanent signs.



Quick: What's a mezzanine, and where is its east end?

## Signs are patronizing

Signs attached to every door on some trains tell us to be safe and considerate. And they use yet another font to tell us that.

These signs block many people's view through the doors. Again: There's no such thing as too many signs.





## Signs are misspelled

Occasionally, signs cannot even get the spelling right.





(This sign was eventually corrected.)

## The TTC ignored a redesign in 1994

In the early '90s, the TTC hired renowned graphic designer Paul Arthur (1924–2001) to develop a new signage system. A prototype was installed at St. George station.

TTC's own testing showed that the new signs worked at least as well as the old ones for most riders. They worked better for riders with visual impairments, those who didn't speak English well, and those with low literacy.<sup>2</sup>

That new system, developed at a reported cost of \$250,000, was simply ignored.

Oh, except that the TTC could not even get its act together enough to remove the prototype signs from St. George. They're still there 14 years later.



## New signs don't work

For the Sheppard subway, TTC's nondesigners threw together a "standard" for new signage. It looks just fine, but actually it isn't. It's derivative and it doesn't perform well.

### *The new signs copy New York's*

Surely by coincidence, the Sheppard signs look like a copy of the New York subway signage, or the kind of copy that would result if you only had a blurry photograph to start with.

New York's subway signage was designed by Massimo Vignelli in 1966, a time when much less was known about reading, accessibility, or signage fonts.

### *New York's signage has its own problems*

- New York subway riders' groups have published two assessments of flaws in subway signage in the last ten years.<sup>3</sup> New York's system isn't a model just because it's in New York
- The New York transit authority later "improved" the design by changing fonts from Akzidenz Grotesk to Helvetica. And that's what the TTC copied 40 years later
- Except that the TTC doesn't even use the real Helvetica font, instead specifying a clone called Swiss 721. And the TTC "signage manual" instructs staff to send font files to whatever printing company is being used, a clear case of copyright infringement



For 23 St & 14 St  
 Mon-Fri  
 6:50 am to 10:05 am  
 3:30 pm to 6:55 pm  
 Take any train to 34 St  
 Change for



**Downtown  
& Brooklyn**

**Broadway Nassau**

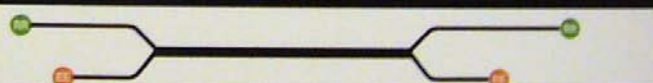
**Uptown  
& The Bronx**



To 241 St  
 (White Plains Rd)  
 All times



To Continental Av  
 Mon-Fri 6am to 8pm  
 Other times take  
 to 34 St Change  
 for



*Fonts on new signs have confusable letter shapes*

Helvetica, Swiss 721, and Akzidenz are all *grotesk sansserifs* in which the letters are made up of almost geometric shapes – perfectly straight lines with right-angle corners, near-perfect circles, and regular angles of diagonals.

As such, all the classic confusable letters really are confusable, including *l* *li* *1*, *e* *a* *s*, and numerals.



The image shows a close-up of a logo. At the top, there is a thin, horizontal pink stripe. Below this stripe is a dark, rectangular background. The word "Bessarlon" is written across this dark background in a large, bold, white, sans-serif font. The letters are thick and have a slight shadow, giving them a three-dimensional appearance. The overall composition is simple and modern.

**Bessarlon**

(Did you notice the preceding sign said Bessarlon, not Bessarion? Letters like i and l are confusable in that font, especially when illuminated or backlit.)

### *Letters are spaced too close together*

Because TTC staff are nondesigners who don't understand signage and readability, there are no special instructions on spacing out the letters on signs. That means they glow together (halate), particularly when illuminated.

If you were caught in a subway fire, would you want to run toward an illegible blob of glowing letters?

### *New York subway lines are not like Toronto's*

Vignelli's design for the New York subway relies on subdividing each sign into halves, quarters, and eighths, which works well for New York's many subway lines, named with a single letter or number each.

It doesn't work at all with a system whose lines are almost never named and use up to three words per name (Yonge-University-Spadina).

It also doesn't work with station names that range from three characters (Bay) to 18 (Scarborough Centre).

### *The new signs were never tested*

Paul Arthur's sign prototype was tested with subway users. The Sheppard-style signs weren't.



## **CONCLUSION: TTC signage is not in a “state of good repair”**

TTC signage was thrown together piecemeal by nonexperts over a period of 50 years. In a single case, those nonexperts did a good job (the original mid-century signage). In other cases, the results have been terrible.

The TTC has shown an antipathy toward any kind of good design. Perhaps the male-dominated culture at the TTC considers “design” the same as “decoration” and thinks it is too girly for a manly transit system.

Whatever the reason, to ignore design means that the TTC wasted a reported \$250,000 on a well-researched, well-tested signage system that was never implemented. Nor did anyone ever get around to removing those prototype signs.

TTC engineers need to accept that signage is not an add-on. It is something that requires expert guidance.

## How do we fix it?

An INVENTORY OF TTC SIGNAGE would be a good place to start. What kinds of signs are there, in what numbers?

Then we need an EVALUATION OF WHAT OTHER CITIES HAVE DONE in the last 10 years with transit signage. Nothing from the distant past, please, like New York City; it just isn't applicable.

Ultimately we'll need a completely new set of signs to replace everything that isn't the original mid-century signage. More importantly, we'll need TRAINING OF STAFF so that the system will actually be maintained for years to come. A typical design firm won't be able to train in-house staff, nor would they want to pass up years of steady income from actually producing the signs.

## How do we pay for it?

Most of the following proposals do not involve any kind of budget increase, merely a reallocation of existing revenue (sometimes foregone revenue).

- REDUCE THE IN-HOUSE ADVERTISING BUDGET BY HALF. TTC's own advertisements are atrocities that are reviled by the press and knowledgeable designers. The TTC doesn't have to advertise itself that much. Take half that budget and put it toward signage

- DIVERT A PORTION OF REVENUES FROM ADVERTISING FORMS THAT COMPETE WITH SIGNAGE. Video signage and vehicle and station wraps compete with wayfinding. They distract and confuse riders, they cheapen the ethics of the entire system, and, moreover, they don't even bring in that much money (a few million a year). Diverting even 10% to 20% of revenue from those advertising forms provides a permanent budget for signage development, staff training, and maintenance
- PIGGYBACK DEVELOPMENT ON SUBWAY RENOVATIONS. When rebuilding a subway station (e.g., Victoria Park), use the signage budget, possibly with a slight increase, to fund development of better signage for the whole system

### *Cancel the Toronto Community Foundation misadventures*

Nobody but the Toronto Community Foundation and a few dowagers in mink stoles really wants the Museum station makeover. It's a waste of money, and signage will take a hit in any such renovation. (Quick: What kind of signs match an Egyptian sarcophagus? They *would* have to "match," wouldn't they?)

If the TTC and the Foundation are intent on wasting that much money, up the budget and use that increase to fund and implement signage improvements across the system.



## Endnotes

1. “Can’t you read the signs? Wayfinding, the art of telling people where to go, is failing miserably in Maze City,” Robert “Wedgie” Fulford, *Toronto Life*, November 1994, pp. 45–48
2. Generations Research Inc., *A Report on Toronto Transit Commission Wayfinding Research* [–] *St. George Station*, May 1994
3. See, for example, *Troubling Signs: A Signage Survey of the New York City Subway System* (2005) by PCAC, which mentions a previous study from 1997

## Colophon

Written by Joe Clark for presentation at a meeting of the Toronto Transit Commission, 2007.01.31. Copyright © Joe Clark 2007. All rights reserved. This report absolutely *is not* licensed under Creative Commons.

All photos are original save for the excerpt from the eponymous *Leila and Massimo Vignelli: Design is One*.

For online versions of this report and much more information, check [joelclark.org/ttc](http://joelclark.org/ttc).

Questions? [joelclark@joelclark.org](mailto:joelclark@joelclark.org).

Set in Freight Text (headlines) and Freight Sans (body copy), both designed by Joshua Darden.