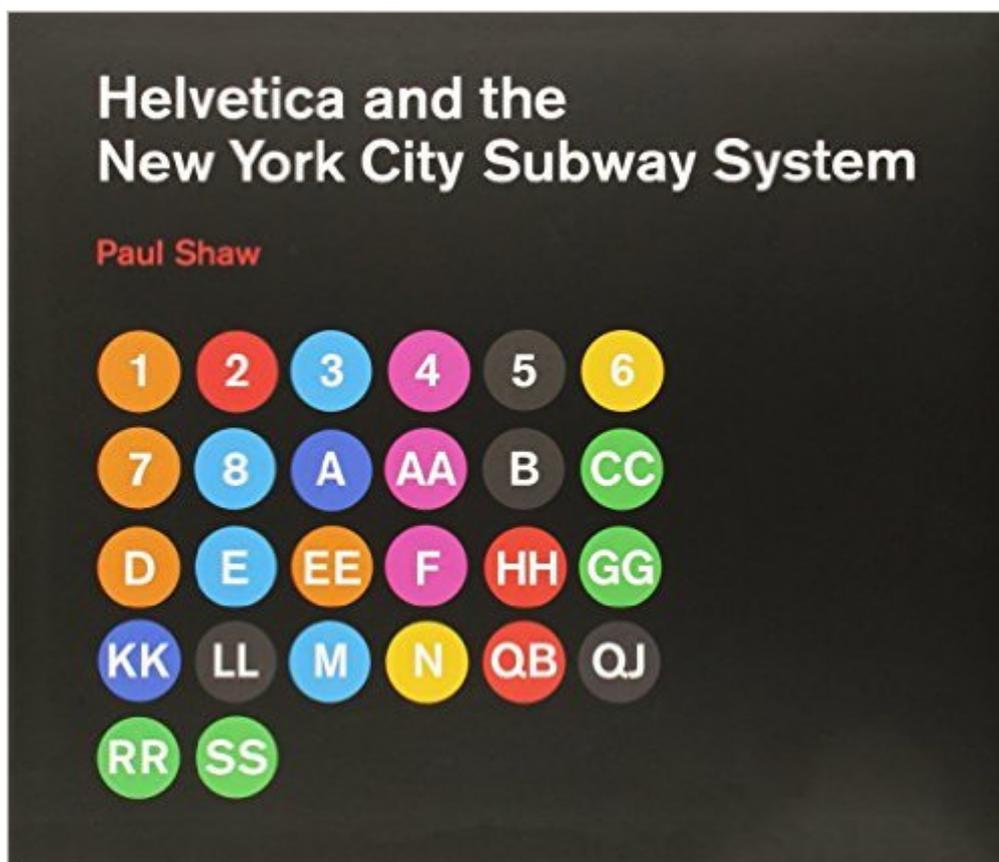


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# Helvetica And The New York City Subway System: The True (Maybe) Story (MIT Press)



## 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 typeface Helvetica is surely the only one that has ever had a movie documentary made about it (and it is a good movie!). Some argue that Helvetica is overused, but if this is true, it is only because it has filled an important typographical niche. It is used especially in public places, especially on civic signs, and many people think that it has always been the typeface for signs in the subways of New York. That's not at all possible; Helvetica is a modern typeface created in 1957. That it is now strongly associated with New York subways, however, just shows how it did take over official and unofficial competitors, but its triumph wasn't easy and it wasn't a sure thing. How Helvetica triumphed is not a simple story; it is full of false leads and missed opportunities. In *Helvetica and the New York City Subway System: The True (Maybe) Story* (MIT Press), design historian and lettering artist Paul Shaw has done quite a bit of detective work about the New York subway's history, as well as touching on transportation graphics in general. The book is large in format and quite beautiful; within its 132 pages are 286 photographs of signs, subway stations, type specimens, maps, and advertisements. Anyone who enjoys thinking about graphics, lettering, or transportation history ought to love this book. The current single network subway was made from a merger of three separate systems in 1940, and each had its own sign system, but no system was internally consistent. The first signs were mosaics on the station walls to show the names of the stations or directions. The labor-intensive tilings were supplemented by enameled and glazed signs on metal, as well as hand-painted and paper signs, with no unity of color, size, or type, and even the mosaic signs were sometimes painted over.

Non-creative folk might be perplexed to understand how a typeface could generate this many pages but here they are and it's a riveting read. The chapter titled 'Bringing order out of chaos' sets the scene with a brief description of the rather slapdash style of signage on the huge subway system developed over the decades. The next chapter looks at signage in Boston, England and Italy, mostly from the sixties onwards (so Harry Beck's map and Edward Johnston's typeface for the London Underground aren't included). The various transit systems had, by now, settled on a sans face loosely based on Standard Medium and in New York this eventually evolved into Helvetica over the years. I always thought it odd that designers didn't take Standard Medium plus Bold or other sans (the Franklins, News Gothic, Venus et cetera) and just use them without modification. Letter

and line spacing seems as important as the typeface in signage. The examples shown in the book have all been made into new faces. Maybe designers feel they must leave their individuality on these projects. It wasn't until the mid-sixties that the MTA people decided to get to grips with a unified type, graphics and signage system. Unimark's Massimo Vinelli suggested ideas but amazingly, because of money problems, not too much came of the recommendations. It seems clear though that whatever outsiders suggested would have problems because of the way signs were produced. The Transit Authority had their own internal unit for making signs and the type stencils for some of these were actually cut by hand. Design manuals specifying all sorts of character and spacing refinements evaporated in reality.

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