LONDON CALLING: THE LONDON ISSUE

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As a native of a small village in Devon and moving to London to study art, I found the metropolis impossible to navigate,” Garland recalls. “I would get on the tube and see Harry’s diagram. London suddenly made sense, and so I asked people at the college if they knew who the designer was.”

Garland was told that HC Beck could be found at the London College of Printing, where he taught part-time, and he paid him a visit. They soon became friends.

Beck first drew his diagram in 1931 – a difficult time to be working for the newly established London Transport Passenger Board. With money tight, the board’s employees could be laid off at short notice. Beck, then 29, had been employed as a “temporary” since he first started in 1925.

While at work drawing an electrical circuit diagram, he had an idea: a new map that would raise the profile of the tube and attract much-needed new passengers, and that would make the system seem modern, quick, efficient – and, above all, easier to navigate.

At the time, the maps of the network showed individual lines run by different railway companies. The Tube map almost never made it out of its creator’s notebook. The designer was Harry Beck, a young draughtsman who drew electrical circuits for the Underground. Beck’s biographer, Ken Garland, befriended him in the 1950s, and before the designer’s death in 1974 he uncovered the story behind the creation of what Beck called “the diagram”.

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““The tube diagram is one of the greatest pieces of graphic design produced, instantly recognizable and copied across the world.”

Ken Garland, biographer
companies. It was geographically correct, but impossible to read. The lines snaked all over the place. The first map, published in 1908, betrayed the fact that different operators were competing with each other and could not agree where the Underground ended.

Harry laid out London’s Underground routes as he would a circuit board, and took it to the publicity department. He told Garland: ‘Looking at the old map of the railways, it occurred to me that it might be possible to tidy it up by straightening the lines, experimenting with the scale, and evening out the distances between stations.’

‘He was modest,’ recalls Garland. ‘He’d quietly taken the diagram to them and said: You may be interested in this.’ The publicity chiefs replied: ‘You can’t do it like this — the public will be really confused by the idea, no one will understand it.’”

His idea was dismissed as ridiculous — people couldn’t understand why it wasn’t geographically accurate — and later he was laid off. Beck’s dismissal made him suspicious of London Underground. He chose to sell the idea to them as a freelancer (for just ten guineas), giving him control for the tube. Passenger numbers had leveled off, and they needed a bright idea to sell the Underground.

Beck embarked on a letter-writing campaign to take back control of his life’s work. It was fruitless. London Underground accepted no argument that the current map was not done by him. It was devastating. To add to the insult, he thought it was a crude and ineffective version of his own diagram. It was signed by Harold F Hutchison, not a designer but head of the publicity department. According to Garland, Beck had become known in the publicity department for being ‘difficult’ when it came to the diagram, and there were moves to remove his stewardship.

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But in 1959, after nearly three decades of working on the diagram, he uncompro- misingly dumped from the project. Garland explains: ‘Harry went one morning to his local station and there on the wall was a diagram that

able as a piece of “trademark” art, Harry Beck was not, according to Garland, part of the modernist movement that was sweeping through the psyche of painters, sculptors, other designers and filmmakers of the period.

‘He was not influenced by contemporary art,’ says Garland. ‘He knew little or nothing about it.’

The diagram, as Beck insisted it was called, was a life-long obsession. As new routes were added, Beck would tinker with his design. He was constantly seeking to improve its clarity, and when the publicity department realized they had a hit on their hands, he had to fend off “helpful” suggestions from tube bosses.

For the best part of 30 years, his home was turned over to the map,” recalls Garland. “There were sketches all over the place. The front room would often have a massive copy spread out on the floor for Harry to pore over. His wife Nora would find, when making their bed, a pile of scribbled notes under the pillow that Harry had been working on in the middle of the night.”

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