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# **SECTION THREE**

## **Cartographic Aesthetics and Map Design**

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# 3.1

## Introductory Essay: Cartographic Aesthetics and Map Design

Chris Perkins, Martin Dodge and Rob Kitchin

### Introduction

If there is one thing that upsets professional cartographers more than anything else it is a poorly designed map; a map that lacks conventions such as a scale bar, or legend, or fails to follow convention with respect to symbology, name placing and colour schemes, or is aesthetically displeasing to the eye. In contrast, a well designed map not only follows conventions, but is beautiful to behold. It is perhaps no surprise then that cartography has often been called both a science and an art. A map is something that is crafted using scientific principles, which aims not only to faithfully represent the spatial relations of the world, but also to be aesthetically pleasing. Balancing these concerns is not straightforward and much research has been conducted to find map design principles that enhance both the communication and look of maps. In particular, such research gained prominence in the second half of the twentieth century after the publication of Arthur H. Robinson's monograph *The Look of Maps* in 1952 (excerpted here as Chapter 3.3).

This introductory essay explores some of the dimensions across which aesthetics and design matters, and delineates and explains how they are changing. Firstly, we consider some of the philosophical issues raised by focusing in different ways of understanding the design and 'the look' of the map. We then move on to consider the changing impacts of technology on map design and, in particular, upon the deployment of different kinds of thematic displays, before suggesting that technology alone

offers only a partial means for explaining the deployment of changing visual techniques. We finish with a consideration of some of the practices and social contexts in which aesthetics and designs are most apparent, suggesting the subjective is still important in mapping and that more work needs to be undertaken into how mapping functions as a suite of social practices within wider visual culture. We conclude that earlier distinctions between artistic and scientific approaches to mapping may be rather unhelpful, and that that tensions between everyday practicalities and theoretical concerns are often overstated.

### The nature of design and aesthetics

Robinson's work spelt out the need for a visual approach to cartography, grounded in a view of the discipline concerned above all else with communication. His research delineated many of the aesthetic factors that might be significant in effective map design. The resulting Robinsonian conceptualisation of cartography was strongly imbued with a functionalist rhetoric. Here, the primary role of the cartographer was to encode information in an optimal map design, such that the map reader would be better able to receive the cartographic message (Robinson and Petchenik 1976, excerpted as Chapter 1.3). For Robinson, aesthetic concerns were narrowly defined in distinctly normative terms: art had a purpose and the purpose was to raise the communicative efficiency of the map. Robinson argued treating maps as art could lead to arbitrary design

1 decisions and that mapping needed to be based upon an  
2 objective application of best design practice.

3 Robinson posited that the process of map design can be  
4 broken down into sequences of different encoding and  
5 decoding operations. Visual matters play little role in  
6 data collection: it is in the abstraction, generalisation  
7 and symbolisation of information that design becomes  
8 important. Generalisation is itself often still a matter of  
9 aesthetics and compromise: the look of the map dictates  
10 what works best when considering how much simplifi-  
11 cation is required and may be particularly significant when  
12 maps depict specialist variables (Jenks 1963, excerpted  
13 as Chapter 3.4). Maps comprise combinations of line  
14 work, symbols, lettering and colours. These are all deployed  
15 through metrics that represent and control space: maps are  
16 projected, sometimes gridded, usually uniformly scaled.  
17 Map design and projection choice inevitably impacts on  
18 the look of a map, a fact exploited by all the protagonists in  
19 the ‘map wars’ over the Peters projection (an equal area  
20 map that displayed the boundaries of countries in propor-  
21 tion to the size of their relative land mass – which looks  
22 distinctly different to the more common Mercator projec-  
23 tion). Indeed, it was the unconventional look of the map  
24 that initially sparked the controversy (Crampton 1994;  
25 Monmonier 2004).

26 The ‘success’ of a symbol clearly impacts on overall  
27 design quality: decisions need to be taken on matters such  
28 as placement, sizing, an appropriate measurement level,  
29 the choice of a qualitative or quantitative representation  
30 and iconicity. In addition, Robinson *et al.* (1995) spelt out  
31 what might be termed the more gestalt-like features of  
32 a design, which work together to create an impression,  
33 including legibility, visual contrast, figure-ground effects,  
34 visual hierarchy and balance, and, rather as an after-thought,  
35 what are termed contextual items, but which largely elide  
36 anything beyond the surface of the map artefact itself.

37 This Robinsonian orthodoxy pervaded the emergence  
38 of academic cartography in North America, and continues  
39 to be reflected in the narrative of cartographic textbooks.  
40 Compare, for example, the sixth and final edition of the  
41 discipline-defining *Elements of Cartography* (Robinson  
42 *et al.* 1995) with a recent text aimed at the North American  
43 market (Tyner 2010). Neither spends much time on the  
44 elements of cartography that are most aesthetic, and, where  
45 they do, the aesthetic is defined in scientific rather than  
46 artistic terms. The principles of cartographic design, based  
47 upon a scientific understanding of how visual cognition  
48 works, are set out in systematic fashion, with the aim of  
49 reducing the chances of ‘inappropriate’ design choices.

50 In contrast, a different approach to information design  
51 comes from the work of Jacques Bertin and, in particular,  
52 the influential text *La Sémiologie Graphique* (1967,

excerpted as Chapter 1.2). Bertin defined what came to  
be known as visual variables: primitives that designers can  
vary in order to construct the various visual codes which  
come together in map symbols and indeed complete maps.  
Alan MacEachren (1994, 1995, excerpted as Chapter 3.6)  
and others have subsequently expanded on Bertin’s work,  
integrating cognitive and semiotic approaches to develop  
an approach to cartography centred on scientific visuali-  
sation. This also led to a focus on mapping processes, rather  
than simply optimal map design.

The rise of critical cartography in the 1990s generated a  
number of challenges to supposed scientific approaches  
to map design. On the one hand, social constructivist  
approaches argued that map design was infused with  
ideological and subjective decisions, even if it was framed  
scientifically. On the other, there was a concern that a focus  
on power relations inherent in design issues would push the  
focus towards exploring how power was embedded in  
maps, thus relegating issues of ‘good design’ to the margins.  
Krygier (1996) suggested that these challenges, along with  
technological change, made it more possible to escape the  
art/science dualism, by encouraging a focus on mapping  
as a ‘sense making process’ encompassing both. So, a con-  
cern for the aesthetic in cartography (Kent 2006) may be  
expressed through science as well as through art; see for  
example the consideration by Dykes and Wood (2008,  
excerpted as Chapter 3.12), where the elegant simplicity  
and intellectual focus of a tree map reflects beauty, and  
where the science of information visualisation is shown to  
work best through artistic registers. And Huffman (1996)  
who explored ways in which design might still matter in the  
relativistic postmodern world.

## Forms of mapping and aesthetics

As well as significantly shaping the approach to map design,  
Robinson’s work also influenced the form of mapping  
undertaken, and by default the look of maps. *Elements  
of Cartography* first published in 1953, and running to six  
subsequent revised editions, elided topographic matters.  
Instead, thematic mapping based on quantitative data  
dominates the text. As a result, the distinction into the-  
matic mapping, and topographic survey or general pur-  
pose mapping, became reified in the day-to-day practices  
of cartography as a profession: cartographers were most  
likely to be trained in the design of the former, not the  
latter. It is perhaps unsurprising then that most subsequent  
Anglo-American textbooks have also had very little to say  
about the design of topographic maps. And perhaps  
these trends are exacerbated in the real world production  
of maps, with a gradual retreat from state-funded national

1 surveys in the face of increasing competition from com-  
 2 mercialised and globalised map sources such as TeleAtlas  
 3 (underpinning much of Google Maps coverage). So, maybe  
 4 what has been termed the ‘blandscape’ of multinationally  
 5 sourced and internet-served mapping will increasingly  
 6 supplant the national design imaginary offered by printed  
 7 topographic products (Kent 2009).

8 The profusion of thematic cartography over the last  
 9 century certainly reflects a changing aesthetic. Examining  
 10 the timeline of significant data visualisation techniques,  
 11 constructed by Michael Friendly and his collaborators, one  
 12 is struck by the diversity of techniques that have been  
 13 invented across many disciplines (Friendly and Denis 2010).  
 14 Academic cartographers deploy choropleths, dasymmetric  
 15 and dot distribution maps, isarithmic maps, proportional  
 16 symbol maps, and cartograms, along with more novel  
 17 multivariate geovisualisations encompassing the animated  
 18 and multimediated data displays (Slocum *et al.* 2008).  
 19 However, in practice, very few of these techniques have  
 20 been deployed very much, or very well. Technological shifts  
 21 such as desktop mapping packages and online geovisuali-  
 22 sation have facilitated an emerging and radically different  
 23 aesthetic, but paradoxically the same shifts have encour-  
 24 aged the mass profusion of often poorly designed thematic  
 25 map output, centring around the use of off-the-shelf GI  
 26 defaults and a limited number of map types.

27 Notable amongst these techniques has been the chor-  
 28 opleth map. First named in 1938 by J.K. Wright, the tech-  
 29 nique creates maps that depict an average value for each  
 30 area. Areas allocated to the same class are shaded the same:  
 31 data are classified. So the designer can change the number  
 32 of classes, the classification algorithm and the nature of the  
 33 shading variation or sequencing (Evans 1977). Many of  
 34 these issues are related to data generalisation, a fact devel-  
 35 oped long ago by Jenks (1963, excerpted as Chapter 3.4).  
 36 Choropleths have probably been more researched than any  
 37 other cartographic technique: their inadequacies were well  
 38 documented by Wright in 1938, and have been extensively  
 39 researched by academic cartographers in the years since.  
 40 The technique hides any variation within the spatial frame  
 41 of each enumeration district and is very often used in an  
 42 inappropriate manner. An unimaginable number of possi-  
 43 ble displays may be made from the same data (but all the  
 44 evidence suggests most users are unaware of this wide  
 45 range); and all too often the sampling frame, the spatial  
 46 units themselves, are a given and not available for the user  
 47 to change.

48 Nevertheless, choropleth’s are a ubiquitous design of  
 49 data display. Martin (2005) found that 60% of all maps  
 50 published in leading public health journals (published  
 51 between 2000 and 2004) was comprised of choropleth  
 52 maps. This over reliance on choropleth mapping reflects

in their seeming simplicity and ease of construction, but  
 also the social roles into which the maps are enrolled.  
 So the classification of space and people, which this kind  
 of thematic display facilitates, has been a useful aesthetic  
 of governance (Crampton 2004).

However the increasing dominance of uniform national  
 map designs, and the development of a thematic tradition,  
 may well be much less pervasive than is supposed. In  
 central Europe, Eduard Imhof exerted significant influence  
 on cartographic practice and training. His classic 1965  
 work, *Kartographische Geländerdarstellung* (Chapter 3.2,  
 excerpted from an English language translation first  
 published in 1982) implicitly recognised the complex  
 interrelationship between symbols and the affective and  
 emotional power of an evocative map design. Imhof noted,  
 for example, that there can be a striking synergy of interest  
 between cartographers and artists in their imitative images  
 of mountains. The Swiss cartographic design tradition has  
 continued to be applied to the depiction of relief in  
 topographic mapping, and some of the most spectacular  
 and aesthetic maps are produced under the influence of  
 Imhof’s ideas (for a recent overview of work in this field  
 see Hurni *et al.* 2001).

The Dutch cartographic tradition also placed greater  
 emphasis upon aesthetic issues in cartographic design  
 (Kraak and Ormeling 2010), as did John Keates’s work  
 in the United Kingdom (Keates 1984, 1993, 1996). Other  
 researchers continued to emphasise the role of subjective  
 decision making and craft in producing aesthetically pleas-  
 ing map designs (Wood 1993), including critiques of pub-  
 lished topographic mapping from researchers such as  
 Collier *et al.* (2003). Consequently, the survival of different  
 visual styles and designs of topographic maps in the face  
 of often considerable pressure towards standardisation  
 suggests topographic surveys continue to reflect national  
 cultural values with map designs continuing to embody  
 aesthetic conceptions of landscape (Kent and Vujakovic  
 2009). See Colour Plate One, page xx, for historically  
 minded instigation.

## The role of technologies

The visual appeal of maps mirror the age when the image  
 was produced. At one level this aesthetic variation reflects  
 technological change. In Woodward’s (1987) monograph  
 about art and the history of cartography, the focus is largely  
 upon an era prior to print production and mass consump-  
 tion, when individualistic and artistic imagery was self-  
 evident in mapping that clearly reflected its unique, craft  
 origins. The worlds of the artist and cartographer were the  
 same until the gradual emerging trade of military surveying

1 began to encourage separation, a process facilitated, in part,  
2 by the application of new technologies. In contrast, con-  
3 temporary mapping could be scripted as scientific, in  
4 particular after the nineteenth century invention of the  
5 thematic map (Robinson 1982). This historical generalisa-  
6 tion has recently been challenged by an emerging focus  
7 on practice (for example, Edney (1993), excerpted here as  
8 Chapter 1.10), who argues against narrowly progressive  
9 readings of map history, and in Cosgrove's (2005, excerpted  
10 as Chapter 3.9) analysis, which suggests that even in the  
11 twentieth century the worlds of artists and cartographers  
12 saw a continuing and active cross fertilisation.

13 However, it is undeniable that automation of map-  
14 making procedures in the mid-twentieth century encour-  
15 aged a professionalisation of mapping that separated  
16 the worlds of the scientific mapmaker from those of the  
17 map user. The user simply read the map, whilst the maker  
18 sought to follow best professional practice. Only after the  
19 emergence of collaborative cartography and the widespread  
20 diffusion since early 2000s of online mapping tools have  
21 distinctions between map users and makers become rather  
22 more blurred in a noted upsurge of DIY mapping. This has  
23 led to a concern amongst many cartographers that we are  
24 entering an age of poorly designed, DIY maps.

25 Indeed, two recent trends highlight a growing recogni-  
26 tion of the need to continue to focus on map design. The  
27 first is an emerging focus on the design of 'expert systems'  
28 that take map designers using a desktop or online GIS  
29 through design options, highlighting strategies that work,  
30 and those that might be inappropriate. For example  
31 Harrower and Brewer (2003, excerpted as Chapter 3.8)  
32 explore how colour might be deployed in choropleth dis-  
33 plays (Colour Plate Four, page xx). Their web-based Color-  
34 Brewer interface guides an unskilled user through the  
35 complex design choices available, offering help with an  
36 appropriate choice of sequence, matching colour schemes  
37 to display media and supporting output of colour speci-  
38 fications for appropriate use. Similar systems have been  
39 designed to guide novice designers through lettering and  
40 scale options. A second strategy has been to encourage bet-  
41 ter map design by taking design skills beyond the tradi-  
42 tional academy and cartographic audience to try to get  
43 at amateur mapmakers in other professions (Darke and  
44 Spence 2008), and, in particular, by offering 'training' in  
45 visualisation aimed at the GI community. Many carto-  
46 graphic design texts are now targeted at this cross-over user  
47 group (Brewer 2008; Krygier and Wood 2005).

48 Technological change also facilitates shifts towards dif-  
49 ferent and more diverse thematic displays. Dorling (1996,  
50 excerpted as Chapter 3.7) charts changes in the cartogram  
51 as a map form. The cartogram rescales representational  
52 space, so that the size of an area reflects a value ascribed to it

rather than its geographical extent. The rather ugly blocky  
appearance of early cartograms, along with difficulties in  
designing them and the problems of recognising the places  
being mapped, may have hindered its widespread adop-  
tion, but the popularisation of an algorithm that preserved  
shape whilst converting areas into values, was influential on  
the publication of subsequent cartograms (see Gastner and  
Newman 2004 for the algorithm; Dorling, Newman and  
Barford 2008 for recent applications of this in the form of  
a global atlas).

More radical design challenges are faced if the designer  
wants to animate a display. Monmonier (1990, excerpted  
as Chapter 3.5) illustrates some of the many possible  
techniques for representing change in mapping. In the  
twenty years since this paper the web in particular has  
allowed many of these techniques to become common-  
place, and the moving power of a map is increasingly  
deployed to depict changing phenomena across different  
media (Cartwright 1999, excerpted as Chapter 2.11). An  
overview of the state of knowledge around the design of  
these displays is provided by Lobben (2008).

Geovisualisation offers an emerging research agenda  
that has seen the development of many novel approaches  
and data display techniques (Dykes *et al.* 2005; MacEachren  
and Kraak 1997, excerpted as Chapter 1.11). Notable  
amongst these techniques are approaches to information  
visualisation, where different dimensions of variation in  
data, without any necessary spatial dimension, are visua-  
lised (Skupin and Fabrikant 2003). For example Dykes  
and Wood (2009, excerpted as Chapter 3.12) deploy tree  
maps as a technique to represent geographic characteristics  
of a geo-referenced photographic archive (Colour Plate  
Four, page xx).

Technical advances and new ways of representing data  
are then still being discovered and deployed. The creative  
impulse is important in this kind of process and the worlds  
and art and science are no longer separate, if indeed they  
ever really were in mapping. Cosgrove (2005, excerpted  
as Chapter 3.9) suggests an overlap between the world of  
popular cartography, and in particular in the making of  
three-dimensional pictorial media maps, and the concerns  
of artists, in the period around the second world war in the  
United States that belies claims of objective rule-based  
design. Not only do cartographers deploy creative energy  
to design their functional maps, modern artists also deploy  
the apparently objective and scientific map to say some-  
thing about the world. The recent upsurge in mapping by  
modern artists, charted by Harman (2009), reflects a set of  
concerns about living in the world that mirror those of a  
designer searching for an elegant design decision. And it is  
in the situated contextual practice of mapping that these  
issues come to a head.

## The contexts, politics and practice of design

Whilst maps have always been displayed in different ways and through different media, recently there has been multiplication in display formats and the context in which the map operates. For example, the same map will be read in very different ways if it is printed, folded, projected, mounted *in situ* in a 'You are Here' format, displayed in an exhibition, deployed as a graphic in association with other printed materials, displayed on a television screen, or a web site, or on a small screen of a mobile device or satnav system. A significant trend has been an emerging focus on context-specific design, from innovative work on web map design at the start of the new millennium (Kraak and Brown 2001) to a burgeoning research field relating to ubiquitous, or mobile cartography. A good example of the need for context-sensitive design is provided by Meng (2005, excerpted as Chapter 3.11), who explores the specific contextual requirements that flow from designing a map for display on a small mobile device, where use is likely to be personal, placed and transitory.

Contextually-informed design focuses on more than the map. Instead it considers factors such as the size of the display area, the nature of lighting, the nature of user interaction, the degree to which use might be individual or collaborative, the extent to which a display might be immersive, and the degree to which a design is fixed or under a user's control. Very few of these has yet received sufficient attention from the design literature and it has recently been argued that usability engineering approaches will be needed to ensure map designs work effectively given the diversity of contexts in which mapping is deployed (Haklay 2010). Instead of artificially simplified experiments, multiple methodologies, including speak-aloud protocols, video coding, participant observation, interviews and questionnaires, are likely to be deployed during investigations of real world map and geovisualisation display scenarios. Ethnographies of design practice will begin to reveal what designers actually do, instead of shoe-horning their practice into pre-established rule structures. And this kind of situated design is much more likely to reflect on the politics of the aesthetic process, instead of pretending that everything can be known by the appliance of neutral science.

What practicing cartographers actually say about their skills and craft may indeed be as revealing as edicts from the academy. In 1999, The British Cartographic Society Design Group investigated best practice in map design. They identified five core principles: 'concept before compilation'; 'hierarchy with harmony'; 'simplicity from

sacrifice'; 'maximum information at minimum cost'; and 'engage the emotion to engage the understanding'. These reflect a continuing focus on qualities that are much more likely to be associated with art than science, with rather zen-like slogans, encouraging creativity, reflection and holistic thinking (British Cartographic Society 1999).

Designers have probably always realised the emotional power that can work through mapping. And technological change opens up the possibilities for this kind of active engagement with 'affect'. Aitken and Craine (2006, excerpted as Chapter 3.10) highlight that mapmakers have much to learn in our designs from film-makers, who have long appreciated that they are working in a dream factory, where products are designed to do so much more than convey information. The moving image has a particular capacity to move its audience, and especially when accompanied by music. The animated and multimediated possibilities of new geovisualisations may be particularly effective if they engage with Aitken and Craine's suggestions and if they implement some of the practices in the British Cartographic Society guidelines.

However, static fixed historical displays also have the capacity to engage emotions. Look at the stark red and black imagery of William Bunge's nuclear war atlas (Colour Plate Six, page xx) and imagine its impact in the fearful world of the cold war. Its persuasive angry agitprop style offers a passionate cry of protest against the insanity of mutually-assured-destruction and the arms race. Technology has facilitated a resurgence of this kind of bottom-up counter-map design (Peluso 1995, excerpted as Chapter 5.6), and Wiki mechanisms exist for sharing and developing best practice in this field (Goodchild 2007, excerpted as Chapter 4.10, for an exploration of the changes this brings, and the Cloudmade web site at <http://maps.cloudmade.com/editor> for an example of a user-controlled design interface). It remains to be seen how researchers' work can be incorporated into these new design worlds, and how tensions between researched and professional design practice and everyday design practice might be resolved.

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