
GO METRO: DESIGN MAPS THE ROUTE TO COOL

BY TOM ZEIT

Get inspired by the creatives at the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority. They're turning government work into some of the country's best design.

Attention, new design grads! Looking for a graphic design job that gives you an amazing variety of work, a fun environment to work in and plenty of room for creativity? One that puts a premium on cool, cutting-edge design? And that gets your work noticed by millions of people? With no overtime?

Think public transportation!

Alright, that might not be what you expected to hear, and, admittedly, it's probably not a good description

of most public transportation agencies. But that just makes what's happening in Los Angeles all the more remarkable. In a car-crazed town where most people found the buses, trains and subway (yes, a subway) unappealing when they noticed them at all, the creative team at the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority—known as Metro—is cranking out award-winning designs and changing the agency's image. Not bad for government work.



GETTING ATTENTION

From *the final* comps for the opening of a rail line extension (above) to an education campaign about bicycling that became a bus tail-wrap (*center*), Metro Design Studio grabs *attention not just* with color and contrast, but *also with* hipness and humor, essential elements *for* improving the community's image of public transportation. This is LA., *after all*.

SIMPLICITY WORKS

A *bedrock idea* for Metro's rebranding effort was that to stand out in the crowded L.A. landscape, the imagery had to *be* bold and simple. The California-poppy color of the redesigned exterior of the Metro Local buses (far right, top) can be seen Jro7n blocks away. An unmissable banner (middle) announces the opening of a new rail line. And the "Opposites" campaign (*bottom*) cleverly challenges solo drivers to rethink (their commutes).

A MASTER PLAN

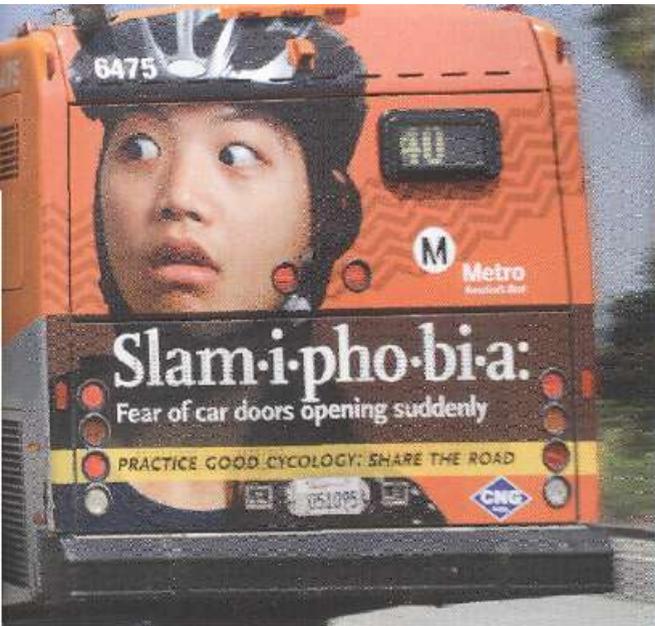
Most transportation agencies run a bus or rail system and little else, but Metro is something different. About 15 years ago, Los Angeles County created one huge entity to oversee all its transportation-related services. That includes a five-line rail system with a subway; a bus system of about 16,000 stops, 190 lines and 2,600 buses; carpool lanes, bike lanes and bike paths; planning of goods movement from one of the busiest port systems in the world; and many other services. The agency, now the nation's third largest, employs about 9,000 people and has an annual operating budget of almost \$3.4 billion.

In 2002, new management at the agency brought all its communications elements together under one umbrella, including advertising, PR, marketing and what came to be known as the Metro Design Studio. The position of creative director was formed, and that design group of 20-some people became the agency's closer for anything that involves some element of design (which is virtually everything). Every bit of communication, every customer touchpoint and every change in service or infrastructure ultimately clears the Design Studio before it goes out to the world, amounting to somewhere between 2,000 and 3,000 individual jobs per year.

"We create outdoor advertising, we do all the signage, we wrap vehicles, we design maps and time-tables—we even do branded merchandise," explains

Michael Lejeune, who has been the creative director since the position's inception, "The range of work is *very* broad. If this were a for-profit design firm, it would almost be too broad."

The reorganization wasn't just about performing a juggling act, though. Bringing all these functions together into one studio allowed the agency to unify its various design elements and create a consistent image. Previously, contractors and consultants throughout the agency were doing all sorts of different design work, leading to a lot of inconsistencies. Lejeune, creative services DEO Maya Ernsden and chief communications officer Matt Raymond believed that this was holding Metro back—and wasting money. Growth in ridership was stagnant, and surveys of both riders and the general population showed that public opinion of the agency and what it was doing was very low. To the new creative team, this wasn't a coincidence.



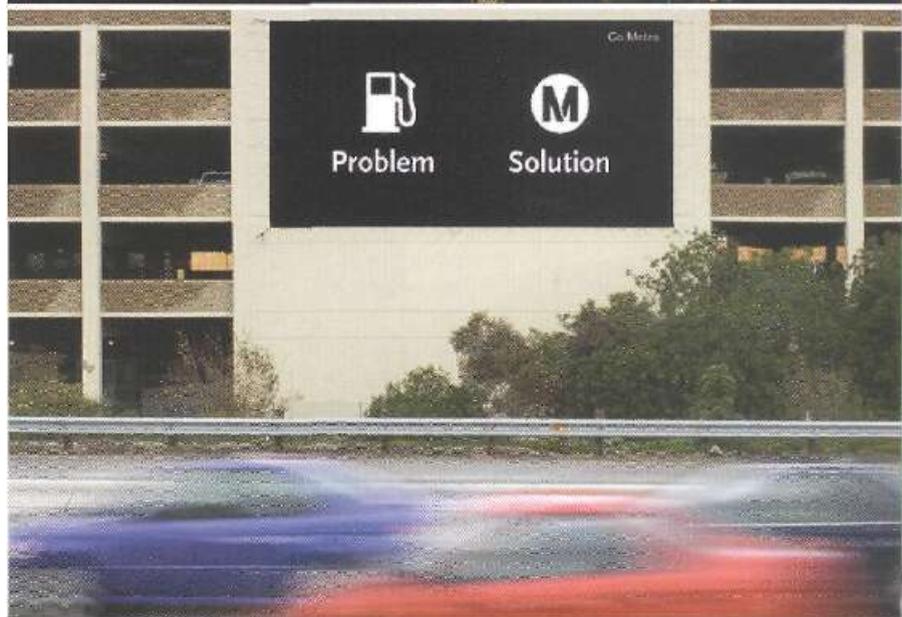
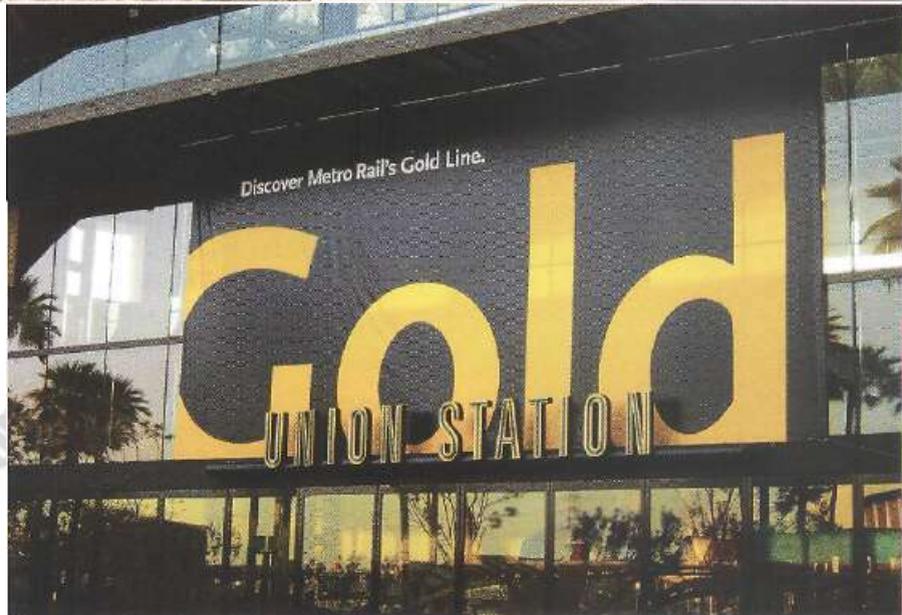
BE COOL OR GO HOME

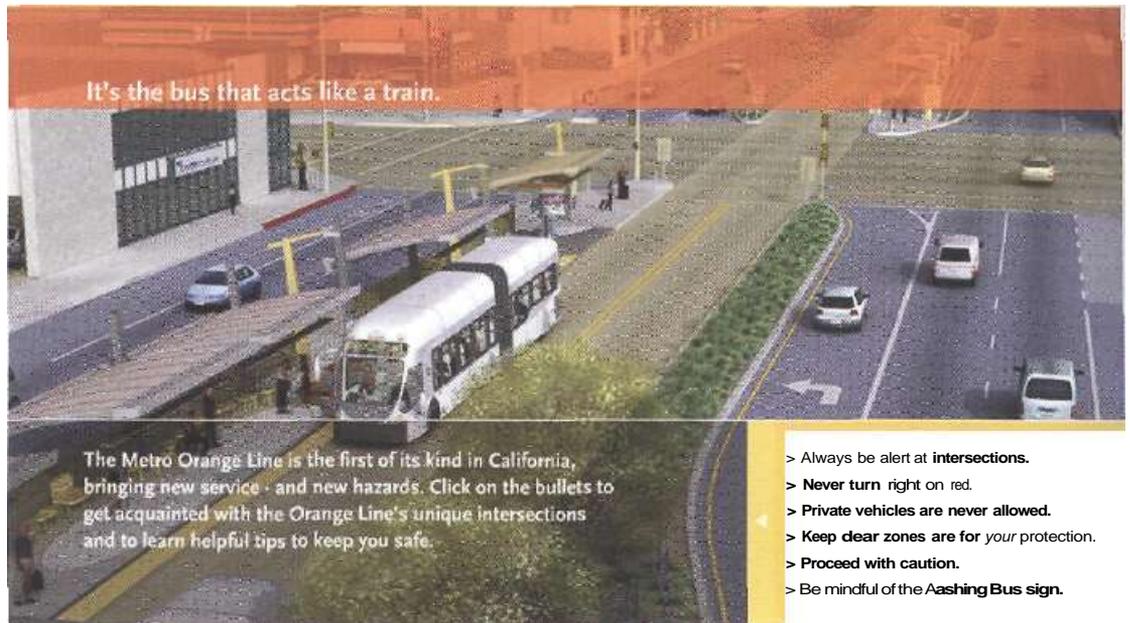
"The first thing we did was to set about rebranding the agency," Lejeune says, "and when I asked what the goal was. Matt replied: 'To make Metro cool.' It was simple and off-the-cuff, but it was exactly the right idea. And we've held to that goal in everything we do." After all, it isn't easy to get noticed in Los Angeles—entertainment and fashion capital, city of early adopters,] town virtually drowning in the new and the hip. People in L.A. needed to be reminded that transportation options actually existed, and looking cool is the best way to get attention there. "We wanted a unique design for Metro that was right for L.A.," Lejeune explains.

So his team added lots of color and bright, fun photography and illustration—all done in-house. They adopted one typeface, Scala, for almost all communication, and had all of their maps and icons, such as those for safety or customer information, custom drawn. "But we also needed to reassure people that we were safe and dependable," Lejeune adds, "and that's one reason we went to one typeface. There's a built-in message of reliability there."

Additionally, they made the language of their communication more engaging, conversational and even humorous. "A lot of it had been written by planners who have degrees in population movement and things like that," Lejeune says. "They weren't used to writing for the general public. We also needed to simplify it because, for half of our daily ridership, English isn't their first language."

"There's a lot of flexibility built into the style," Lejeune continues, "and because everything goes through our studio, we don't have to reissue a style guide when we want to update something and hope that offices all over the world will follow it, the way a large company does."





GETTING THE HOUSE IN ORDER

Alongside the rebranding effort, Emsden and Lejeune focused on building up the Design Studio's internal staff. Lejeune works with an art director and about eight designers, but his team also interfaces with web operations and employs two full-time photographers. The studio works closely with the marketing group, and Metro has its own print shop that handles most of the studio's jobs.

All these capabilities proved especially valuable early on after the reorganization, because, oddly, a crucial step in raising the level of design work was gaining the confidence of other departments within the sprawling agency. Roughly 80% to 90% of the Design Studio's clients are internal to Metro (the rest tend to be promotional partnerships with local attractions such as pro sports teams), and while the agency maintained a policy that design work was to go through the studio whenever possible, "people weren't actually doing that," Lejeune says. "And you don't build positive relationships by forcing people to use you, so we had to be seen as a better alternative to spending money outside on a contract."

This is how one measure of success arrived: The number of jobs the studio receives has quadrupled since the reorganization, and now they're regularly getting asked to do new things—TV commercials, motion graphics, interactive offerings to handheld devices—all of which have to be designed and branded. That's been good news for the staff, because it has steadily built their confidence and it keeps their jobs interesting.

"I've never really felt bored," says senior graphic designer Sharleen Yoshimi. "The work is too diverse and fast-moving for that." Having come to Metro live years ago from a boutique advertising company,

Yoshimi began by focusing on print advertising and now does mostly environmental graphic design.

She says she never forgets that she's working for a public agency, and she's proud of that fact. "I think it's ingrained in us that, we're working with taxpayer dollars," Yoshimi says. "We always want to come up with the best design solution, but not always the most expensive one—We're always trying to weigh that out."

Another confidence builder for the staff is simply that their work is getting a lot of positive response from the L.A. community. "When I interview people, they've often come to us because we've caught their attention," Yoshimi says. "They've noticed our ads or the graphics on the buses, and they want to be a part of this unique opportunity. That's a good feeling."

Not all of the Design Studio's work gets in the public eye, however. One of their regular clients is Raffi Hamparian, Metro's government relations manager for federal affairs, whose job is to get as much funding as possible from Congress for L.A. transit projects. That lobbying effort requires a lot of handouts, proposals and presentation materials. Let us think these are simple jobs, Hamparian will convince you otherwise.

"No matter how appropriate our requests are for the federal government," he says, "they would all go for naught if we weren't able to explain in a clear, concise and content-rich manner what we want, why we want it and why it's necessary. And, I think that around the nation, we've got just about the best material I've seen." As opposed to the studio's typical work, which is seen by hundreds and thousands and sometimes millions of people, "they're very comfortable with the fact that this document might be seen by only 10 people, yet it's equally important, and that takes a leap of faith," Hamparian says.

USER-FRIENDLY DESIGN

To go along with a sleek new bus fleet for their Orange Line, Metro had to attract a new class of riders—younger and more tech-savvy—who weren't already familiar with public transportation. That required a website with plenty of resources, lots of interactivity and a design that's uniquely Metro.

THEY LIKE US!

So the team at Metro Design Studio has generated a lot of buzz in the design community and they've won some awards—the group has work in the National Design Archives in Denver, for instance, and has scored wins in HOWs In-HOWse and International Design Awards. But has it really succeeded at improving the agency's design and transforming the image of L.A.'s public transportation?

first, after the rebranding, the unification of the design and the change in the "voice" of the all the related copy—not to mention a quadrupling of the agency's ad budget in order to make these changes more visible—surveys in 2004 indicated a complete reversal of public opinion. Whereas only about 30% thought Metro was doing a good job initially, 75% thought so only a year later. The number of customer complaints dropped nearly in half over the same period, too.

"And the most interesting thing about this," Lejeune says, "was that we hadn't yet undertaken any significant additions in service. Service hadn't necessarily changed or improved, yet people felt that service was better and the agency was doing a better job. So it was mostly about perception."

But, an even better indicator of success, according to Lejeune, came on Election Day last November, when the public actually put its money where its mouth is. In the midst of a terrible economy, Metro had placed a measure on the Los Angeles County ballot that would add a half-cent to the sales tax, with the proceeds to be used exclusively for transportation projects, all of it administered through Metro. To pass, the measure needed not just a simple majority but two-thirds of the votes,

"It was a big gamble," Lejeune says. "After this initial period of trying to change people's perceptions, we sort of rolled the dice and said, 'OK, let's see if it worked.'" In the run-up to the election, the agency produced a tight information campaign, all of it generated by the Design Studio.

The result? The measure passed. "That was a really significant marker," Lejeune says proudly, "that in L.A., with so many freeways, where so many people cling to their cars, and in the worst economy we've had since the Great Depression, people would vote for the future like this. This never would have been possible before."

Now the agency is expected to receive another estimated \$40 billion over the next 30 years, and that means there's going to be a building spree in L.A.—more rail lines, more dedicated busways, more bus service and much more yet to be determined. Those new projects will all need their own design, so the Design Studio's work is only getting more interesting. In other words, in L.A. at least, it's a great time to be a designer in public transportation. ■■■

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MICHAEL LEJEUNE LOS ANGELES www.metro.net



ALL OF A PIECE
The Design Studio touches nearly every one of Metro's public interlaces and pieces of communication, and the unification of all this under one design aesthetic was critical to the rebranding. Whether it's the agency's quarterly publication (top), or day passes that require 365 color combinations produced with counterfeit-resistant fluorescent inks (middle), or rider brochures with custom-drawn icons (bottom), Metro's image remains consistent.