

Leiden: An Alternative Map For An Alternative City?

There has been much debate within the last decade over what constitutes a “map”. To most, a map is a tool for navigation, an instrument that allows a user to gain an overview of an area for what are largely orienteering purposes. The assertion that a map must accurately indicate distance and bearings on a particular scale is a commonly held perception (Keates, 1989), but academics have increasingly been discussing the ulterior motives of cartographers and the ideas they wish to convey through their maps (Campbell, 1991).

But what about deliberately abstract maps that ignore such standard conventions, instead looking to create a primarily artistic tone? Whilst such maps contrast with the very principles of traditional cartography, essentially they do envision space, merely in a different perspective to more conventional mapping.

Precedents have been set for such personal interpretations of space. The rise of humanistic, and subsequently cultural geographies, drew attention to the idea that maps could incorporate human experience into cartography, rather than simply showing the environmental aspect of an area (Soini, 2001). The art of interpretation in mapping has largely been confined to making sense of a key/legend in relation to what is shown on a map, but more abstract mapping allows users to communicate with what is being portrayed. In this sense, a better understanding of what is being shown may be gained from a more conceptual map than a traditional cartographic one, at least from a cultural or social level (Wood, 1992).

The “map” under scrutiny in this essay is Jos Agasi’s map of Leiden, a city in the Netherlands, conceived in the style of the De Stijl art movement. One of the most striking aspects of the image is that it could work as a standalone piece of artwork, and in many ways it does, until the context of the design is explained. Noted below are some of the features associated with De Stijl that are present in this image, as well as some notable design techniques that Agasi has employed: -

Light grey used to indicate canal system. Interesting that they mirror the shape of the main roads on the outside of the city centre, whilst being less noticeable than the road network due to their colour. Possibly symbolic of their reduced importance over time.

Agasi said the map started as a "personal graphic exercise". De Stijl embodies precision and geometry, much the same way as cartography does.

Simplicity was a key feature of De Stijl, made possible by the restrictions placed on colour and line use (Padovan, 2002). The attempt to simplify a city through the use of De Stijl ideas is evident.



The use of diagonal lines was a contentious issue, as originally only horizontal and vertical lines were used. This caused a split between key members of the movement, leading to the withdrawal of Piet Mondrian from the group (Overy, 1991).

Thick, black lines are used to show the main roads in Leiden, emphasising their significance whilst acting as reference points. The contrast provided by the use of black allows the primary colours to stand out further.

Use of the three primary colours as well as the neutral tones Grey, White and Black, in keeping with the originally rigid principles of De Stijl (Overy, 1991).

Figure 1: Jos Agasi's "De Stijl Kaart"

The compositionality of the piece is of great interest, as there are many devices used by the artist to create a desired feeling. The image uses contrast effectively, juxtaposing its dominant hues, most notably the primary colours, with neutral tones of grey. However, these dominant hues are not all used in the same way. Towards the outside of the image, most notably the areas beyond the main road network, the primary colours are presented in a lower saturation to their counterparts more central in the piece.

This technique helps to illuminate the colours in the centre, whilst also making the light grey lines representing the canal system to become more clearly visible. This device was possibly used because of the relative lack of colour the artist was able to use because of creating the map in the limiting De Stijl style. The use of low value neutrals towards the outer and brighter whites in the centre was a novel way of allowing Agasi to show the canal system in the focal point of

the image, without compromising the ideals he was following. Monmonier (1993) describes the use of differing grey tones to distinguish contrast between land and water in mapping, a technique that has certainly been applied to *De Stijl Kaart*.

It is supposed that the blocks of colour do not represent any particular type of landmark or building, and that their distribution is purely an artistic tool. Whereas colour can for example be used to distinguish between terrain and roads in cartography, the use of colour and its distribution in Agasi's image is more symbolic. No two identical blocks of colour are showed adjoining, which is possibly a reference to the ideas of influential architect Hendrik Berlage. A theorist whose ideas were developed by a number of art movements, including De Stijl, he saw the spatial distribution of colour as representative of mankind's "unity in diversity" (Overy, 1991).

Whilst the most notable feature of the design is undoubtedly the style in which it has been produced, it is important to remember that the project started as a graphical, geometrical exercise. The addition of the blocks and primary colours were secondary to the objective of creating a visual representation of Leiden in linear form. This prioritising approach gives the image some degree of cartographic credibility, whilst rather aptly indicating that De Stijl is interwoven into the city's framework. The work was originally deployed as a publicity image for an exhibition showing the influence of De Stijl on architecture in Leiden, a context in which the design fits, given the involvement of several architects in the De Stijl movement (Padovan, 2002).

The map quite ironically shows the actual impact of De Stijl on architecture, in that it was largely confined to drawings and ideas, rather than actual built structures. Collaborative efforts between painters and architects within the movement drew upon the rhythmic, simplistic principles of De Stijl, but ultimately never realised the vision they had designed on paper to the extent that the founder of the movement, Theo van Doesburg, would have originally envisaged (White, 2003).

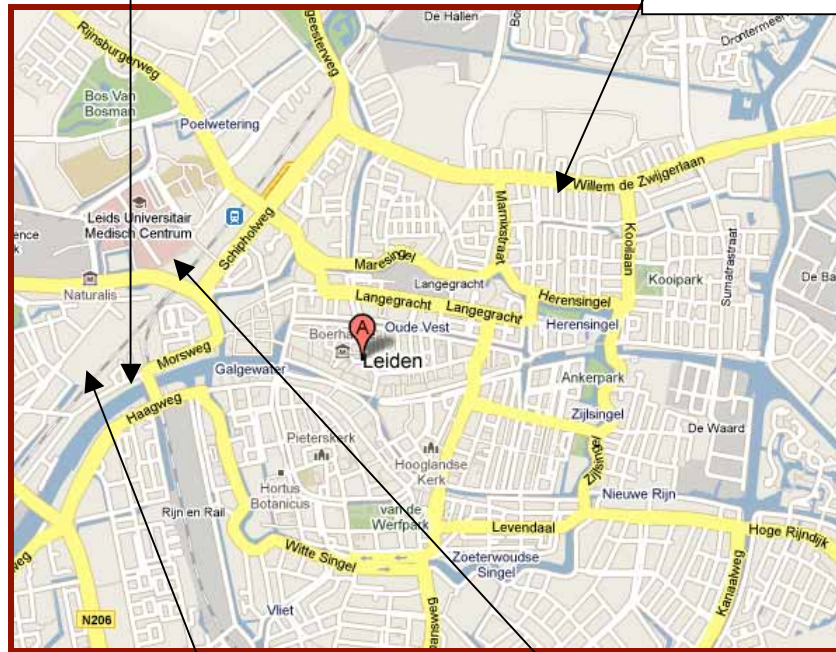
However, the map was subsequently featured in a book entitled, 'U bevindt zich hier - Een reis door Leiden in 80 kaarten', which translates to “You are here – A voyage through Leiden in 80 maps”. This inclusion meant that the image was being presented in a different context to how it was in the architectural exhibition. Previously, the purpose of the map was mainly to advertise, whereas in the book, the implication is to contrast Agasi’s map with others, immediately suggesting a more analytical context to the image. The collection of maps in the book were designed as part of a competition, where the aim was for individuals to submit their own interpretations of the city map based on what it meant to them.

Though not originally created for the book, the map works in this context, as it fits the criteria for inclusion. Indeed, the map is arguably more suited to this medium, as it is clear from the outset that the image is a vision of the city of Leiden. Agasi’s map also benefits from being placed amongst other artistic or humanistic interpretations of mapping. In its previous form when used as part of an advertisement, it may not have been clear that the piece had any cartographic connotations. Whilst it is certainly an eye-catching form of art, thus clearly suitable for advertisement purposes, it could easily have been mistaken simply for an example of a De Stijl painting, with the Leiden context not being immediately visible to viewers of the piece.

Considering the amalgamation of mapping and art in Agasi’s piece, a clearer understanding of the work can be gained through the analysis of a mainstream map of Leiden, such as Google Maps’ offering. A street map is the most directly comparable conventional map type to *De Stijl Kaart*, as Agasi primarily aimed to show the streets of the city rather than any relief aspects.

Canals shown as blue with variable widths, which differs to Agasi's standard width for canals. The reason for this is probably in order to remain in keeping with the De Stijl ideals of order and continuity (Padovan, 2002)

Main roads instantly recognisable, though proportionally wider than in Agasi's map. Roads are deliberately exaggerated in size in order for them to be visible on a map, due to their significance to the majority of map users (Darkes and Spence, 2008).



Similarities with *De Stijl Kaart* include the use of light grey to denote areas with no discernable interest to the map user. The use of grey for such areas allows the more important features, such as roads and canals, to come to the fore.

The use of lower saturated hues is a feature of this map in comparison to Agasi's. The idea is clearly to make the key features stand out, comparable to *De Stijl Kaart* in this respect, at least at this zoom level.

Figure 2: Leiden, Google Maps

The use of a set of rigid guidelines is common in cartography, with many features of maps largely standardised, with only minor variations in features, for example line weight, between some maps.

Whilst street maps are useful for navigation purposes, there is relatively little variation in their design, despite the huge number of companies that now compile maps in the digital age. This

type of homogenisation could lead to maps being neglected as an art form, a feeling Harmon (2004) shares when calling for, “maps that find their essence in some other goal than just taking us from Point A to Point B”.

Maps have long been presented in a variety of different contexts, be they for propaganda purposes during times of war (Holmes, 1991), or to illuminate a news story through use of a pictorial map. Different types of mapping require different skill sets, and it is important that the skills of artists are not lost within the discipline of cartography. Visual images are used in a variety of ways to convey a range of different impressions (Rose, 2001) and whilst traditional cartographical practices remain the standard for mapmakers, stagnation in map variety must not be allowed to happen.

A topological map cannot symbolise Leiden’s history and culture in the same way that *De Stijl Kaart* can. Whilst the topological map serves a purpose, the information displayed is almost entirely environmental. Assumptions can be made as to the likely culture of a city judging by the labels and symbols shown, but such information can only truly be garnered when some conventions of cartography are abandoned in favour of a more humanistic approach. Indeed, all maps are subjective to some degree (Johnston, 2000) and map art is merely a more extreme interpretation of an area. The two methods can peacefully co-exist, but care must be taken to ensure the survival of both in the future, a responsibility shared by cartographers, geographers and artists alike. [Word Count - 1965]

References

- Agasi, J. jos@agasi.nl (2009). *De Stijl Leiden Map*. Wednesday 25th November 2009. Email to: Liam Kirk [liam.kirk@student.manchester.ac.uk].
- Agasi, J (2007). *De Stijl Kaart*. [Online], Available: <http://www.agasi.nl/destijlkaart/index.html> [19th November, 2009].
- Campbell, J (1991). *Map Use and Analysis*. Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown Publishers.
- Darkes, G and Spence, M (2008). *Cartography: An Introduction*. London: The British Cartographic Society.
- Google (2009). *Leiden Map*. [Online], Available: <http://maps.google.co.uk> [20th November, 2009].
- Harmon, K (2004). *You Are Here: Personal Geographies and Other Maps of the Imagination*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.
- Johnston, R.J (2000). *The Dictionary Of Human Geography*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Keates, J.S (1989). *Cartographic Design and Production*. Harlow: Longman Scientific and Technical.
- Monmonier, M. (1993). *Mapping it Out – Expository Cartography for the Humanities and Social Sciences*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Overy, P (1991). *De Stijl*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd.
- Padovan, R (2002). *Towards Universality: Le Corbusier, Mies and De Stijl*. London and New York: Routledge.
- RAP Architectuurcentrum (2007). *De Stijl En Het Nieuwe Bouwen In Leiden En Omgeving*. [Online], Available: http://www.rapsite.nl/artikel.php?artikel_id=25 [24th November].
- Rose, G (2001). *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction To the Interpretation of Visual Materials*. London: Sage.
- Soini, K (2001). Exploring human dimensions of multifunctional landscapes through mapping and map-making. *Landscape and Urban Planning*. 57 (3-4). pp. 225-239.
- U Bevindt Zich Hier (2008). “A Voyage Through Leiden In 80 Maps”. [Online], Available: <http://www.ubevindtzychhier.nu/> [25th November].
- White, M (2003). *De Stijl and Dutch modernism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Wood, D (1992). *The Power of Maps*. London: Routledge.