

MASS TRANSIT

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graphics

While a transit system's image is more than skin deep, looks do count when trying to attract riders to transit, which is what a new graphics program hopes to accomplish in Los Angeles



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NEW LOOK FOR THE RENAIS- SANCE

by Ray Hebert

essential, especially since 230 new Grumman Flxible advanced design buses were due soon and the first of 940 new General Motors RTS models—the largest single order of its kind—would start arriving in September.

How does a public transit system change its image?

A new look—colors, graphics and other components of its visual identification—is the first step toward improving that image. But changing the image is more far-reaching than just colors or graphics. It ranges from the appearance of the buses, of course, to the uniforms worn by drivers

Saul Bass/Herb Yager and Associates have their studios on one of the busiest streets in Hollywood—Sunset Boulevard.

Hundreds of buses pass by daily. Most are operated by the Southern California Rapid Transit District (RTD) and when Bass/Yager team members noticed them, the dull color scheme—yellow ochre, silver, white and black—offended their artistic senses.

The buses have carried those colors since 1964 when the RTD was established. Los Angeles bus riders have become so accustomed to them, just as they would accept an old sweater or a worn pair of shoes, that they no longer noticed how colorless and unattractive the buses were.

The colors were outdated. The graphics splashed on the buses had lost their style, clearly dating them as a holdover from the 1950s. A real giveaway was the transit district's monogram—the letters "RTD" slanted behind a boomerang-like curve.

In 16 years the image that the color scheme and RTD monogram portrayed had finally lost its effectiveness. No longer representative of today's times, the design was as outmoded as many of the buses, some 25 years old, in the RTD's 2,604-bus fleet.

Transit district officials decided the time had come to do something about the system's image. A new look, they agreed, was

and the service both buses and drivers provide.

That's where the Saul Bass/Herb Yager team, an internationally known design firm involved in creating corporate identities and motion picture consulting, stepped onto the scene.

Saul Bass, the group's president and founder, has been an interested observer of Los Angeles' transportation problems for many years. He has offered technical suggestions to help solve them, but when the RTD asked him to develop a new visual identification program, it marked the first time he had become actively involved as a design consultant for a transit agency.

Bass regarded it as a community service. A contract approaching \$100,000 was involved but it didn't match the expertise and artistic professionalism long associated with the Bass/Yager firm.

"I viewed it as a personal project," Bass says. "Los Angeles is my home. We all know that public transportation is one of the major issues that confronts society generally—and Los Angeles in particular."

"The need to increase public transit has become a vital part of any community's well being. I saw a new visual identification program for the RTD as part of a contribution to making people more aware of the existence and excellence of the region's primary public transit system."



The new look developed for the RTD includes a yellow and orange design that has a sunburst effect symbol replacing the former flying boomerang

In recent years a number of transportation companies, notably airlines, have been included among Bass/Yager clients. For example, Bass produced the new blue and red trademark, which looks something like a pair of Us, for United Airlines and the red circle with flared white stripes that adorns Continental Airlines planes. The firm also was responsible for the stylized blue bell within a blue circle which identifies AT&T.

Bass/Yager's work in other corporate identity programs has become a familiar part of almost everyone's daily life. On television and in motion pictures, viewers instantly recognize the three white capsule-like shapes on a blue field as Warner Communications' trademark and the open hand holding a rainbow as the identifying symbol for United Way.

Bass also created the packaging for such products as Quaker Oatmeal and Wesson Oil. And, in the motion picture field, he was responsible for the symbols and credit titles for "Advice and Consent," "The Man with the Golden Arm," "Anatomy of a Murder" and many other films.

He also has designed scenes for numerous motion pictures, including the famous shower sequence in the late Alfred Hitchcock's movie, "Psycho."

But it is a long jump from the Hitchcock thriller to changing dowdy buses into at-

tractive, colorful vehicles that people will ride, not only because many have to but because they also want to.

In contracting with Bass/Yager, RTD Director Marvin Holen, then the transit district's president, said the RTD was "looking toward improved visual identification to complement the city's renaissance in public transit."

Jack Gilstrap, then RTD general manager, was mindful of the increasing number of riders turning to transit district buses since the severe gasoline shortage of May 1979. With gasoline prices rising, RTD buses are now carrying almost as many passengers as they did during the peak of the shortage—more than 1.3 million a day.

"Thousands of people, many of them unfamiliar with public transit, have turned to the RTD during these times of increasing gasoline costs and scarcity," Gilstrap said. "An improved identification and communications program will help solve these problems."

The Bass/Yager firm tackled the job just as though it was undertaking a new corporate identification program for Rockwell International, also was one of its clients.

The RTD, however, presented a different kind of problem for Bass designers.

"The bus is such a pervasive part of our environment," Bass says. "Cleaning up the buses—a whole fleet of them—not on-

ly makes them more attractive but it also helps reduce what is otherwise regarded as visual pollution."

Bass/Yager's program has involved almost the entire spectrum of the RTD system, including not only the buses but new information signs to improve service at the district's 30,000 boarding sites in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and Ventura counties.

The program began with a lengthy research and analysis study to pinpoint, as Bass/Yager put it, the system's organization and marketplace.

The firm initially presented a proposal, based in part on some of the RTD's own objectives, that included ideas ranging from the basic theme, "Look as good as you are," to provisions for extensions and changes that could be adapted, as Bass/Yager explained, "to almost any conceivable future RTD (needs), be they print or three dimensional. . . ."

Advising the RTD on its "looks," the proposal said, in part, "An image of a quality transportation system should be conveyed . . . a modern, efficient system that is ahead of its counterparts in other major cities.

"There should be no dowdiness or lingering impression of a system behind the times," the proposal, presented to the

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lation.

"Part of the challenge in providing public transportation for Los Angeles County residents, with their traditional dependence on the automobile, is creating a climate of confidence for new riders," Holen explained. "These new information signs do that."

The signs were designed to provide answers to the questions most frequently asked by new riders. According to marketing studies, the riders are concerned about whether they are boarding the right bus, where it is going, availability of transfers and fare rates.

Indeed, the signs contain such a wealth of information that RTD officials expect them to reduce substantially the 10,000 telephone calls the transit district receives each day at its Transit Information Center.

In the meantime, the skill and artistic know-how that Bass/Yager's designers applied to the RTD's buses is beginning to appear on lines served by the new Grumman Flxible buses.

The buses came from the manufacturer,



One of the main problems Bass/Yager identified was a wide range of exterior markings on RTD buses representing changing looks over the years, but the most recent design was the flying boomerang and yellow ochre, silver, white and black colors

sporting the RTD's new look, just as the General Motors vehicles will later this year. But it will be at least two years before the entire fleet is transformed.

The new color scheme is simple, crisp and clean—the goal Bass was trying to achieve. Dramatically different from the old

yellow ochre combination, the design capitalizes on a narrow yellow, orange and red band extending from the front of the bus to the rear at the base of the windows.

The colors exude a sunburst effect. The smoked-glass windows are black and the rest of the bus, the lower sides and the portion above the windows and the roof, are white.

Bass also has given the RTD a new symbol to replace the aged flying boomerang. It consists of a grouping of meshed arrows, pointing right and left, which, Bass says, is intended to show the multi-directional nature of the system as well as its expanse. Coupled with the arrows are the letters "RTD"—no longer slanted but simple and upright.

"It's a classic symbol that will stand the test of time," Bass says.

As for the color scheme with its sunburst band, he says it was designed to give the buses a sense of motion. Those particular colors—yellow, orange and red—were used because they reflect the sunshine and warmth of Southern California, he says.

"The significance of this color scheme is that it acts as a signal—a signal that says, 'There goes an RTD bus,'" he says. "Generally it signals a concern and care and a reflection of what the RTD is doing in introducing new, modern buses."

"It's . . . an external manifestation of the RTD to make the system work. More people are going to be using the buses because we know the energy problem is not going away." □

Ray Hebert covers urban affairs for the Los Angeles Times.

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