Reidentifying the Victoria Line

Words Joe Lloyd Photographs Phil Dunlop

"Is it possible to improve the machine?" Last summer, this question was emblazoned above the entrance to Brixton Underground station in London. Posed by the artist Giles Round, it was the symbolic starting point for Design Work Leisure (DWL), a project that aspires to use art and design to enhance the city's transport network.

DWL is a temporary design studio ("part research facility, part lobby for change") created for the Underline festival, an ongoing Transport for London (TFL) arts programme that invites artists and designers to develop projects for the Underground's Victoria line. Led by Round in conjunction with an advisory panel of technical experts, DWL aims to use design to positively intervene in the fabric of the tube, drawing on the Victoria line's history and pre-existing design in order to improve user experiences.

What sort of improvement could DWL implement? The Underline festival is part of Art on the Underground, the arts-sponsorship wing of TFL. "We didn't want to parachute art in," says Kiera Blakey, the programme's curator. "Instead, we wanted to do something that's really caring and comes from knowing about the environment." The tube is a functional space whose operation keeps the metropolis running, yet also a historical site with its own distinct aesthetics. With this in mind, DWL's original question at Brixton could be extended: "Is it possible to improve the machine while respecting past improvements and without disrupting its function?" Round's answer to this led him to tiling – a quotidian response, but a medium that has played a key formative role in the architectural landscape of the London Underground.

When the Central line opened in 1900, it boasted clean white tiles designed to reflect light and alleviate the claustrophobia inherent to suburban spaces. A few years later, the architect Leslie Green clad the exteriors of his numerous station designs across the Piccadilly, Bakerloo and Northern lines in oxblood terracotta tiles. On the platform walls, Green identified each stop with tiles that spelt out the station's names between colour-coded abstract patterns on an off-white base. A fusion of the Central line's functionality with a new decorative dimension, this was the first formal example of art on the Underground.

As with Green's work, the new tiles that Round has developed for the Victoria line make use of abstract patterns. They display chevrons, which evoke motion, as well as striped lines that embody the tube's linear nature. Taken individually, the tiles are minimal; yet when they are placed in a mural, the tessellations become hypnotic in their patterning, without being overbearing. "The specific goal from the outset was to produce objects that move beyond their function and integrate art with industry," says Round. The tiles have already been installed on the exterior facade and the ticket hall at Blackhorse Road, as well as on the walls connecting the escalator landing to the platforms at Victoria – the first time an artwork has been installed at platform level since the 1980s. Vauxhall and Seven Sisters are planned to follow, with the eventual intention of spreading the tiles across the line as each station undergoes routine maintenance. It is a slow, piecemeal approach to improving the space, yet one that stands in dialogue with the Victoria line's last great experiment in employing tiling and design to improve the user experience.

When the Victoria line was built between 1962 and1972, the visual consultancy Design Research Unit (DRU) was hired to develop the new line's identity. DRU had been founded in 1943 by the advertiser Marcus Brumwell, the poet Herbert Read, and designers Misha Black and Milner Gray, making it Britain's first multidisciplinary design studio. Active across architecture, graphics and product design, DRU created the British Rail logo, the City of Westminster street signs and seating covers for the District line, thereby establishing design as a powerful tool in shaping postwar British public services. Aesthetically, the practice's work centred around simple, unified schemes that provided a coherent identity without imposing, as embodied in its founding manifesto: "Like every aspect of modern industry, design should be a co-operative activity."

For the Victoria line, DRU proposed a scheme that featured rounded, white-panelled platform roofs that would be illuminated by slender strips of lighting. It was the kind of light-touch proposal that the practice was known for, and one in keeping with its principle of developing design projects that were "contemporary in spirit and progressive in outlook". Significantly, the design promoted a distinct identity for the Victoria line – an achievement that is unsurprising given that Gray is often credited with coining the term "corporate identity". Because of budget and time constraints, DRU's proposed architectural features were never installed across all the Victoria-line stations, yet the agency was able to complete its plans to introduce platform wall tiles. These were largely restrained and off-white – labelled "lavatorial" by some critics – but enlivened by bench recesses at each station that were adorned with a distinct, artist-designed pattern. A dense labyrinth for Warren Street; two crossed rifles over a single tree for Finsbury Park; and at Brixton, a literal tonne of bricks.

DWL's graphic tiles installed at
Blackhorse Road Underground station.

As the originator of the Victoria line's identity, DRU was Round's immediate forerunner, but also his intellectual forebear. Round's artistic practice has often centred around the same co-operative ideas that DRU espoused. In 2011, he transformed the Serpentine Gallery's Sackler Education Centre into an open studio, with public workshops spread across six weeks. His collaborative project with fellow artist Phil Root, the Grantchester Pottery, produces decorative functional objects such as coffee services and vases.

Inspired by the Omega Workshop, the design collective founded by the art critic Roger Fry in 1913, Grantchester Pottery posits that people should be able to produce and sell their own design items, and as with DRU a common thread of Round's work has been the democratisation of design and art. His adoption of the acronym DWL is a conscious echo of DRU, as was the decision to work under a collective name. A single artist, the idea ran, would not suffice to improve a collectively experienced machine.

This notion of the collective was vital to the DWL project, with research focused on the people who use the line's structures more than anyone else – the staff. "They are underground all day," says Blakey, "and that changes your perception of space and time." Round set a survey for station staff, identifying how they experienced different aspects of the line. There were suggestions for crafting branded cutlery for staff canteens, or creating new station clocks, but the results of the survey put the spotlight firmly on tiling. "There was a great affection for the tiles," recalls Round, "which the staff thought could be enhanced with more colour. The aim was to make works that could integrate into the fabric of the Victoria line; works that could be both functional and decorative." Yet the exact format of the tiles proved more difficult to resolve – "more colour" is far from a comprehensive design brief.

The nature of the environment, fortunately, provided some guidance. Deep lines like the Victoria are generally cramped, with narrow corridors and platforms that quickly become congested. In a crowded carriage, the train never seems to travel fast enough. "If one wants to compare life to anything," wrote Virginia Woolf in 1919, "one must liken it to being blown through the Tube at fifty miles an hour." Yet the gloss has faded from Woolf's early vision. The Victoria line's 87.2km/h maximum speed now feels humdrum, while rush hour can seem like the upper levels of an updated Dante's *Inferno*, a world in which people used to constant stimulation are forced to stare silently into the fabric of one another's clothes. Round's design had to soothe rather than exacerbate such stresses, as well as responding to the fact that complex installations run the risk of muddling the clarity of station signage. DRU understood this, hence the elegant simplicity of its designs, yet subsequent works have been less successful. When some of Eduardo Paolozzi's 1984 tile mosaics at Tottenham Court Road were removed last year, the reaction was split between outcry and relief. Although colourful and inventive – a melange of many-coloured moths, saxophones, electronics, gears and faces – Paolozzi's works were uncompromisingly, and overwhelmingly, the vision of a single artist.

In part, Round's reliance upon abstract geometries is an effort to cleave closer to the clarity of DRU's designs, yet he was also influenced by William Morris, the Victorian writer and designer who became the presiding spirit of the arts and crafts movement. Morris believed that functional design should in itself be treated with the care and privilege ascribed to art. In an 1883 essay, he asked his readers "to extend the work of art beyond those matters which are consciously works of art[...] but the shapes and colours of all household goods[...] to extend it to the aspect of all the externals of our life". Morris's subsequent wallpaper and tile designs were a bold, single-layered simplification of the relief-prone tiles that had preceded him – a sensibility that carries through to DWL. Just as Morris used botanic imagery to symbolise growth and regeneration, so too was Round concerned with using hues from nature. "The less like nature the tiles are, the more you'll find problems," he says. The consequent colour choices for the DWL tiles are purposefully everyday, blending in rather than popping out. Dominant in the palette are an oceanic blue, which was originally considered as an identifying colour for the Victoria line, and a dusky black. The pattern components and tessellations at Blackhorse Road, meanwhile, were derived from Morris's tile designs and ceiling wallpaper at his Red House in Bexleyheath, one of the most significant arts and crafts residences.

Further parallels to Morris abound in the project. Fired by the idea of a semi-mythical medieval society focused around craftsmanship, Morris was a fervent critic of mass production. For Round, it was important that the DWL tiles be made somewhere that embodied these precepts. Hidden away in Jackfield, Shropshire, is Craven Dunnill, one of Britain's foremost manufacturers of handmade tiles. Much of its

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work is heritage-based, yet since 2002 its partner company Johnson Tiles has provided replacement tiles for much of the tube network. "Before then," explains Blakey, "the London Underground never had an official supplier. When it came to maintaining stations, you just couldn't do it. Now there's repeatability and sustainability."

The multiplicity of techniques available at Craven Dunnill allowed the DWL tiles to be screen-printed, the same process used for DRU's tiles in the Victoria line's seat recesses. "Making something stylistically Victorian, or from laser-cut parts, would be incongruous with the tiles already in the stations," says Round. Craven Dunnill's devotion to handmade craft allowed the tiles to be designed by a process of trial and error, homing in on what worked. It also allowed for a sense of craft. "The beauty in having the tiles produced by hand is that they include variance," says Round, "no matter how perfect the production."

Round's fidelity to Morris's ideas would likely have found favour with Frank Pick, an early-20th-century administrator whose work defined the early aesthetic of the Underground. Along with a bevy of collaborators, Pick created a cohesive identity for the tube that

was based on ease of comprehension. He stripped away the stations' clutter, cultivating a network centred around tidy convenience. Pick commissioned Edward Johnston's Underground typeface and roundel; invited Harry Beck to turn a vermicelli of squiggles into the modern tube map; and oversaw the airy, welcoming stations designed by Charles Holden, many of which – notably on the northern section of the Piccadilly line – rank among the highlights of modernist architecture in Britain. Pick's core aesthetic criterion was "fitness for purpose", an idea that Round sought to recapture with DWL. "The DWL tiles should serve to augment the line's aesthetic rather than transform it," says Round. "It felt important to work with the shared ethos of these different individuals from different periods."

One similarity between Pick and Round seems particularly pertinent. A notable innovation of Pick's was to remove the willy-nilly flyposting that had been endemic in stations – a decision that, over time, has been partially reversed. The contemporary traveller on the Underground is bombarded with advertisements

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– in the ticket hall, on the escalators, along corridors and platforms, and in carriages. For six months last year, the French financial services company Société Générale even turned the seats and exteriors of Waterloo & City-line trains into promotions for itself and the Rugby World Cup that it had partnered. "The adverts are owned and maintained by an external business, so this wasn't an avenue that presented itself for us to work on," acknowledges Round, yet his tiling nonetheless militates against the proliferation of marketing, even if only symbolically. By and large, Underground adverts are photographic in nature – depicting theatre casts, sportspeople and models – whereas the DWL tiles are resolute in their presentation of abstract pattern alone. It is an approach that divorces the tiles from the visual noise of the ubiquitous advertising, distinguishing them by their lack of marketing message.

The DWL cannot echo the total design ethos that its predecessors Pick and DRU attempted to practice, as evidenced by the drip-fed adoption of the tiling by the Victoria-line stations. The same financial constraints that curtailed DRU's scheme continue to hold. Sixty-five per cent of the tube's budget goes into sustaining the network. The bulk of the remainder, much of which comes from public grants and borrowing, is used for infrastructural improvements, leaving art and design low on the list of TFL's priorities. Yet in this straitened situation, DWL represents a thoughtful approach to improving the experience of the Victoria line, one that is sensitively attuned to its identity and the tube's historical precedents. When you approach Blackhorse Road station, Round's tiles leap out from their drab surroundings. Within Victoria station, they provide a momentary respite from the advertising on the escalators and platforms. It is gratifying to find a space, however small, that is not devoted to commercial concerns. END