

ENVIRONMENTAL GRAPHICS - CASE STUDY

Northline

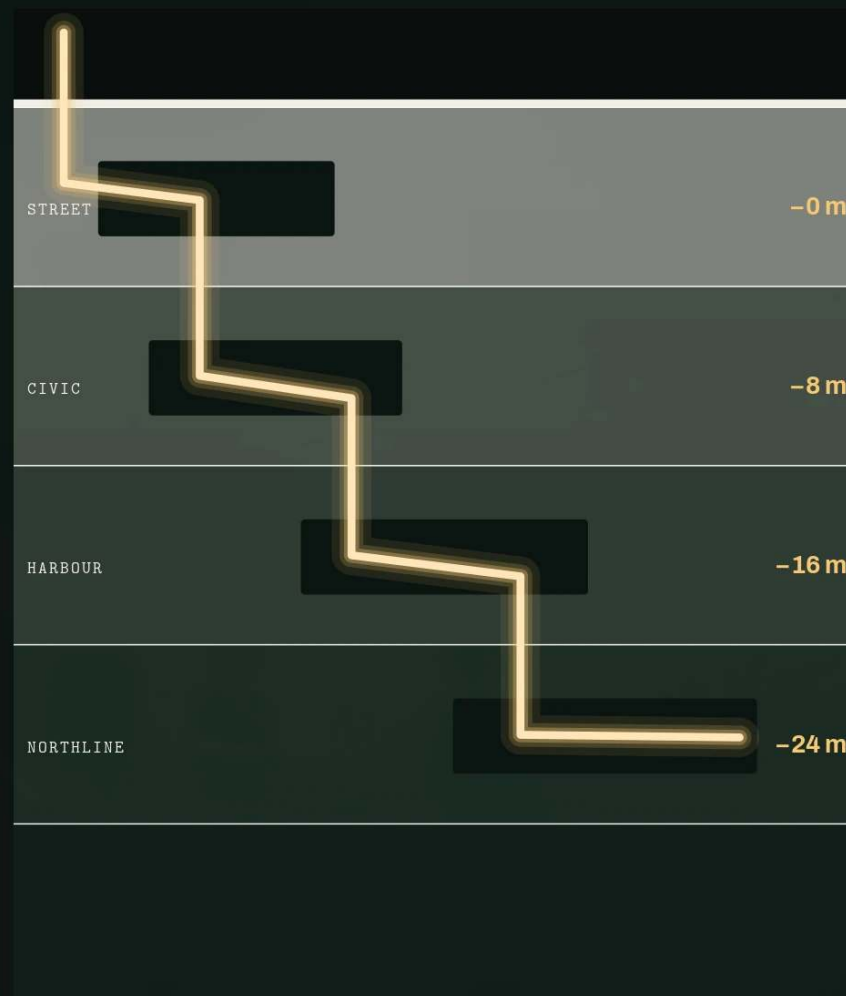
Follow the light out.

A transit interchange navigated in section, not in plan —
one warm line from the deepest platform to the street.

SCOPE	Wayfinding · light · surfaces · access
IDEA	Depth is the identity
MOVE	We deleted the line colours

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THE STATION, IN SECTION - FOUR LINES, FOUR DEPTHS

Northline

OVERVIEW

Northline is a deep transit interchange where four lines stack on top of each other. I designed its environmental graphics around a single idea: the station should be navigated in section, not in plan. That produced a continuous line of warm light, a colour system where colour means altitude, and a map that is a cutaway rather than a floorplan.

CHALLENGE

An interchange is where wayfinding fails, and the standard fix — colour-coded lines, arrows, more signs — was already in place and already not working. I had to find out why people were still getting lost before I designed a single panel.

STRATEGIC THINKING

I followed forty travellers through the station. They almost never hesitated at a corner. They hesitated at every change of level: 74% paused at the mid-level transfer, 61% at the top of an escalator, against 8% at a corridor junction. Nobody gets lost in plan. They get lost in section — and no wayfinding system on earth tells you how deep you are, or whether the street is up or down from here. Then the second realisation: four lines meet here, and each one sits at a different depth. The station had already labelled itself, in metres. So I deleted the colour-coded line system — it was inventing a second, arbitrary language on top of one the building was already speaking.

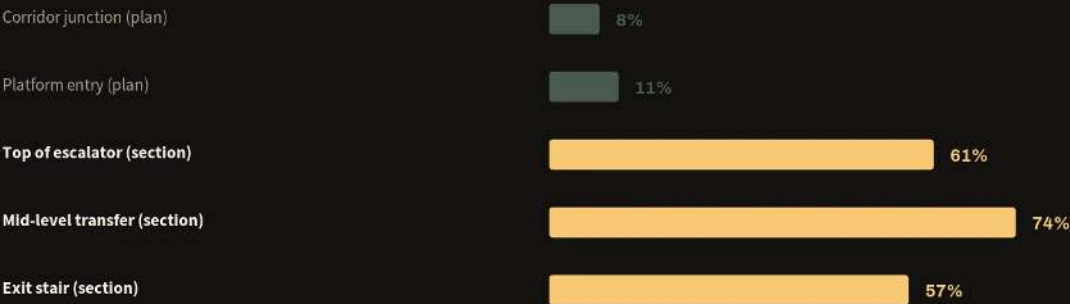
The insight

THE INSIGHT

Nobody gets lost in plan. They get lost in section.

I followed 40 travellers through the interchange. They almost never hesitated at a corner. They hesitated at every change of level — because no wayfinding system on earth tells you how deep you are, or whether the street is up or down from here.

WHERE PEOPLE STOPPED AND LOOKED AROUND



Every existing system answers "which way?". None of them answer "how deep am I, and is the street up or down from here?" — the only question people were actually asking.

THE MOVE

Depth is already a unique ID.

Four lines meet here, and each one sits at a different level. The station has already labelled itself — in metres.

So I deleted the colour-coded line system. It was inventing a second, arbitrary language on top of one the building was already speaking.

Navigate in section.

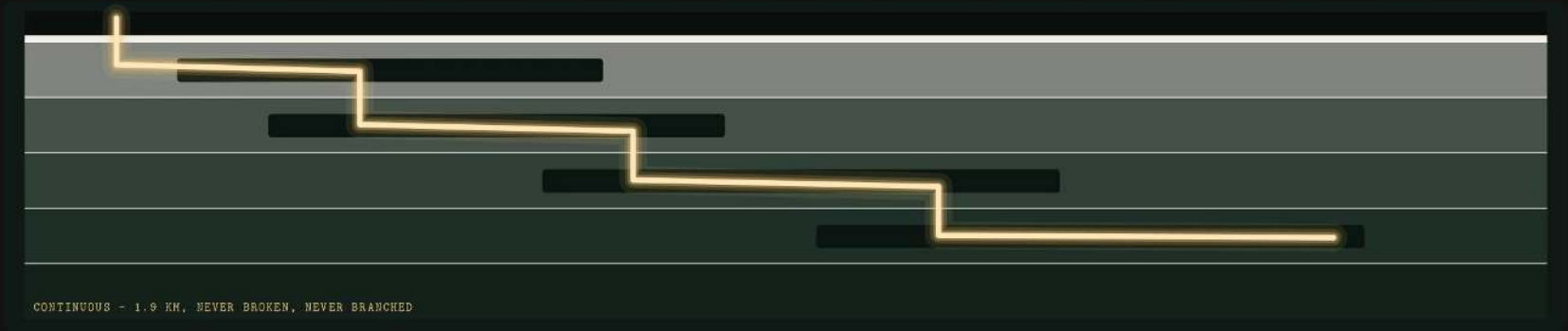
THE DAYLIGHT LINE

The Daylight Line

THE INVENTION

The Daylight Line

One continuous warm line runs unbroken from the deepest platform to the street. It is the only warm light in the station. You never need to read a sign to know which way is out — you follow the warmth.



It only ever goes one place

The line has no branches. Follow it in one direction and you reach the street. There is no wrong way to follow it.



It is the only warm thing

Every other surface is cool. Warmth reads as daylight at the end of a tunnel — a bias every human already has.



It is at hand height

900 mm. A recessed channel you can rest your hand in and walk. The line is a handrail that happens to glow.

SPEC					
CHANNEL	60 mm recessed, anodised	SOURCE	2700 K LED, 90 CRI	HEIGHT	900 mm to centre
				RUN	1.9 km continuous

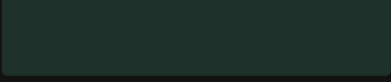
COLOUR IS ALTITUDE

Colour is altitude

THE DEPTH SYSTEM

Colour is altitude

Surfaces get colder and darker the deeper you go. Your eye reads your depth before you read a word.

	±0	STREET Park line · surface	#F2EFE6
	-8	CIVIC Civic line	#C6CFC0
	-16	HARBOUR Harbour line	#7E9484
	-24	NORTHLINE Northline	#42604F
	-32	DEEP Plant & tunnels	#1E322A

WHAT WE REMOVED

~~Four line colours~~

~~A colour key on every map~~

~~Coloured bullets on every sign~~

~~A legend nobody reads~~

**Kept: a number, an arrow,
and one warm line.**

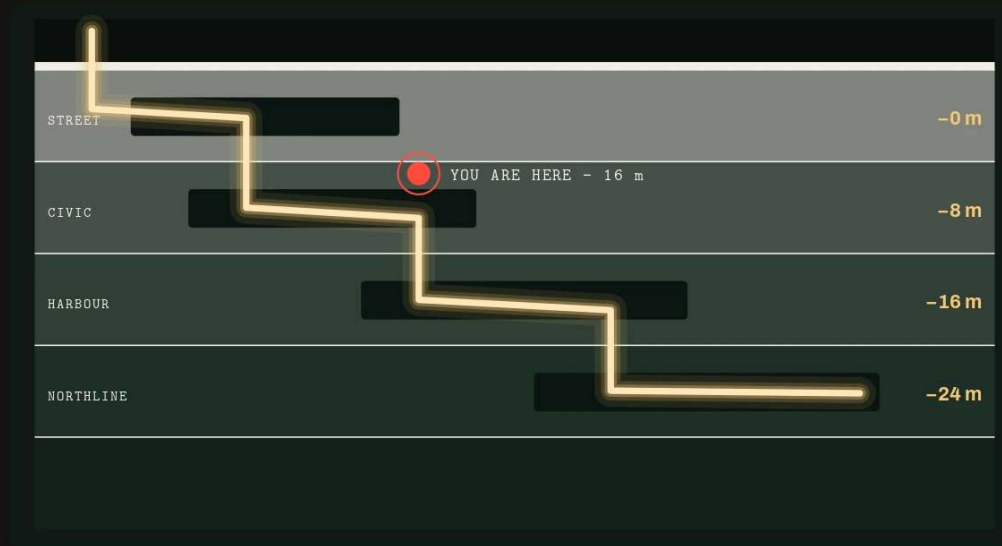
A sign now carries two facts instead of five.

THE MAP, IN SECTION

The map, in section

THE MAP

You-are-here, in section



PLATFORM MAP - THE ONLY MAP IN THE STATION

WHY A SECTION

A plan map answers a question nobody underground is asking. It shows you a city you cannot see, from an angle you are not standing at.

A section shows the traveller the one thing they actually want: where they are in the stack, and how many levels lie between them and the sky.

THE ONLY INSTRUCTION IN THE STATION

The street is always up the line.

IN SITU

In situ

IN SITU

One warm line, four levels down



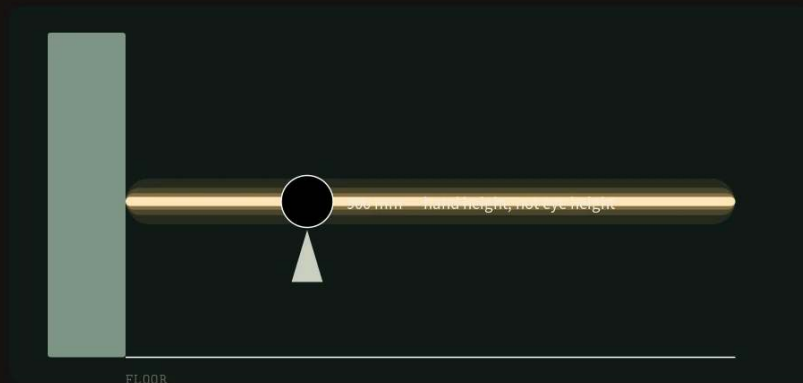
ACCESS

Access

ACCESS

The same object serves everyone

Accessibility isn't a layer on top of this system. It is the system — because the line is a thing you can touch.



SECTION THROUGH THE CHANNEL

Contrast: line 8.9:1 against every depth band · numerals 12.1:1 · all pass AA large and AAA.

- **Follow it blind**

A continuous recessed channel at hand height. Run your hand along it and it takes you out. No braille to find first.

- **Follow it in smoke**

In an evacuation the line is the egress route — it is already the thing everyone has been following all day.

- **Follow it if you can't read**

Warm = out. That is the whole instruction, and it needs no language.

OUTCOMES & REFLECTION

The outcome

FINAL SOLUTION

A station with one instruction: the street is always up the line. Follow the warmth and you surface. The line climbs the escalator soffits with you, runs the length of every platform, and finally breaks daylight at the entrance — the only thing in the building that goes all the way through.

RESULTS

A sign now carries two facts instead of five. The system degrades gracefully in the ways that matter: it works if you can't read the language, because warm means out; it works if you can't see, because the line is a handrail before it is a graphic; and it works in smoke, because the egress route is the thing everyone has been following all day. Accessibility isn't a layer on top of this system — it is the system.

LESSONS LEARNED

The best environmental graphics aren't applied to a building — they're found in it. The station was already telling people where they were, in metres of rock above their heads. All I did was stop shouting over it. The most valuable thing I designed here was the four colours I removed.

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