

OCTOBER 10, 2013 2:57 PM

Exclusive Video: Learn About the Designers Behind New York City's Iconic Subway-System Signage



BY MICHELLE MEMRAN

“Everything that surrounds us has been designed by somebody,” says Massimo Vignelli, “and most of the time *badly*.” Fortunately in New York City, at almost every turn we’re graced with the indelibly crisp, iconic imagery of Italian-born design duo Lella and Massimo Vignelli. Collaborating (and married) for more than five decades, the Vignellis moved to New York from Italy in the 60s and immediately established themselves as designers without borders. Juggling several projects at once, they created many of corporate America’s most recognizable logos (Ford, Bloomingdales, American

Airlines), in addition to furniture, books, magazines, posters, architectural graphics, interiors, glassware, dinnerware, jewelry, and, perhaps most conspicuously, the signage for the entire New York City subway system. Their influence is everywhere, and yet their focus has always been on the work rather than themselves.

Filmmakers Kathy Brew and Roberto Guerra, another collaborating couple, set out to change that. Their enthralling documentary *Design Is One: Lella & Massimo Vignelli* opens tomorrow for a weeklong run at the IFC Film Center in New York City and goes beyond the duo's epic portfolio to reveal the intimate dynamic of their long-lived partnership. "Design is totally integrated into their daily life, even down to making a spaghetti lunch together," says Kathy Brew. "They live with their designs—they set their table, eat off their plates, drink from their glasses, sit in their chairs. They live with what they've created." And after you watch *Design Is One*, it's almost impossible to walk anywhere in this city and not see something the Vignellis had a hand in.

Here, in this exclusive clip from the film, Massimo revisits their work for the New York City Transit Authority. After being commissioned in the early 70s—before the personal computer—Massimo did all of their subterranean drawings by hand ("I'm the pencil," he says, "Lella's the criticism"), which included a stunning, minimalist subway map. Canonized as a work of modern art and beloved by many, the Vignelli map also drew harsh criticism by commuters who wanted more geographical "information." Although the M.T.A. discontinued the Vignelli map in the late 70s, it never really left New York's consciousness (a copy hangs in the Museum of Modern Art), and two years ago the Vignellis were brought back in to design the M.T.A.'s digital *Weekender* site, based on their original design. "See, their work is not just about a trend, or the flavor of the month," says Brew. "They make beautiful things that have real staying power, but that process also involves trial and error. In the end, their work is not about what matters now but what matters years from now." See a clip from the documentary below: