

So fresh and so clean:
a visual redesign for the
Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid
Transit Authority.

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Design Capstone

Anyone as intimately familiar with Atlanta as I am will tell you that Atlanta is a driving city. In short, I don't think it has to be this way. Atlanta has a public transportation system. We have trains that run in two directions (north/south and east/west), a relatively thorough bus system considering how sprawling the city is, and a street car that will certainly be of very good use to tourists. Our public transportation, much like many infrastructural programs in Atlanta, is underfunded, and because of this, hasn't seen significant design attention since the 1996 Olympics.

For my capstone, I intend to undertake a visual redesign of MARTA. I firmly believe that all the parts to a usable system are there, but lack coherency that makes a transit system usable.

I've identified some key problems that I'm going to solve, although I'll no doubt uncover more as I progress through my capstone. I will elaborate on them now.

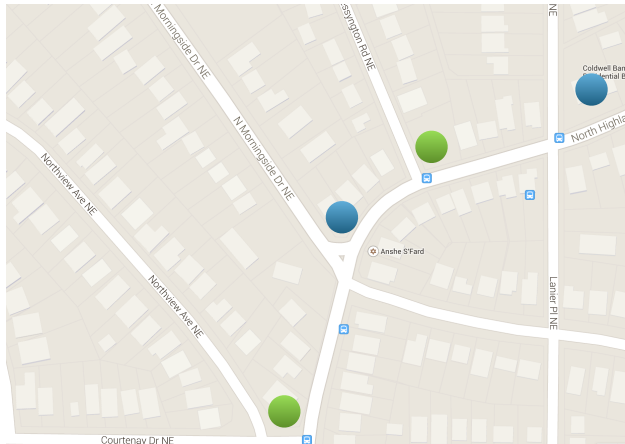
Problem 1: Signage

Signage is what pulls a transit system together. Look no further than Vignelli's Standards Manual for the NYCTA for evidence of this. MARTA's signage is terrible. MARTA is unusable without taking busses, and taking busses is hard. This is what most bus stops look like:



Notice the complete lack of route number, let alone a rough schedule or, you know, any indication of what's supposed to happen beyond a bus coming sometime in the next hour, maybe. Their haphazard placement on telephone poles or lamp poles or on whatever those pieces of metal that hold up signs are called means that they're

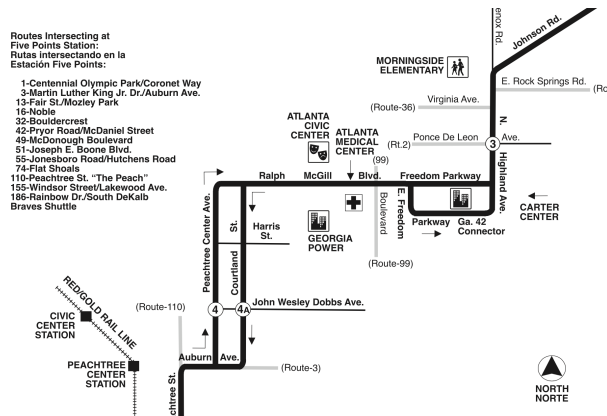
incredibly vulnerable to vandalism, theft, and Atlanta drivers, meaning that there's not even much guarantee a stop marker will be there in the first place. Often, you just sort of have to know. MARTA also has several bus routes that overlap, and to avoid confusion, the two busses will stop a block apart from each other.



Green dots represent where the 16 bus stops, and blue dots where the 36 stops. Of course, to figure this out, you'd have to consult two completely separate schedules that look like this:

Notes	AvSS	EPLO	CIde	BrDe	BaVi	10CA	MiSt
	05:08a	05:13a	05:26a	05:33a	05:42a	05:47a	05:51a
	05:45a	05:50a	06:03a	06:12a	06:22a	06:28a	06:33a
	06:28a	06:33a	06:51a	07:00a	07:10a	07:16a	07:21a
Z	06:58a	07:03a	07:21a	07:30a	07:40a	07:46a	07:51a
	07:08a	07:13a	07:31a	07:40a	07:50a	07:56a	08:01a
	07:46a	07:51a	08:09a	08:18a	08:28a	08:34a	08:39a

Or route maps that look like this:



And no, Atlanta's streets do not follow such lovely right angles as the map might have you believe.

Like I said, it's hard.

To solve this, we have to rethink from the ground up what a bus-stop is. Because even in cities like Boston, bus stops still aren't great. Every bus stop will have clearly indicated route numbers, and will follow a modular design, so that no matter whether a bus stop has a shelter, or is in a bus terminal (of which there are a few), or is just on a residential street corner, it will look like a bus stop.

Train station signage is also a far cry from ideal. Take a look at these beauties:



I don't even know where to start. Probably the drawing board.

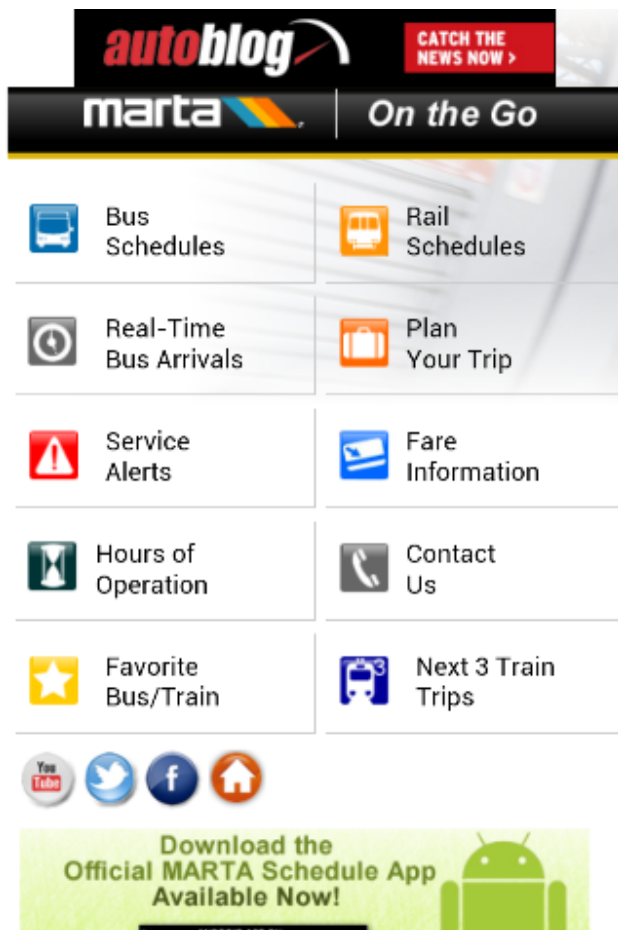
Obviously, nicer typography is a given (serifs! really!), and much clearer descriptions. Ellipses will be done away with entirely.

Problem 2: Web Presence

MARTA doesn't really have one. Their website actually hasn't been updated since 2009. To its credit, there is a fairly active @MARTASERVICE account on Twitter, and there is one worthwhile mobile app compatible with MARTA, but developed by a third party. I firmly believe that mobile apps are often a design crutch—a shortcut for designing a practical system—but that's certainly not to say they don't have a place. MBTA's Commuter Rail apps are truly excellent examples of what a transit app can be. MARTA does have a few apps of their own design but—you guessed it—they're fucking terrible.

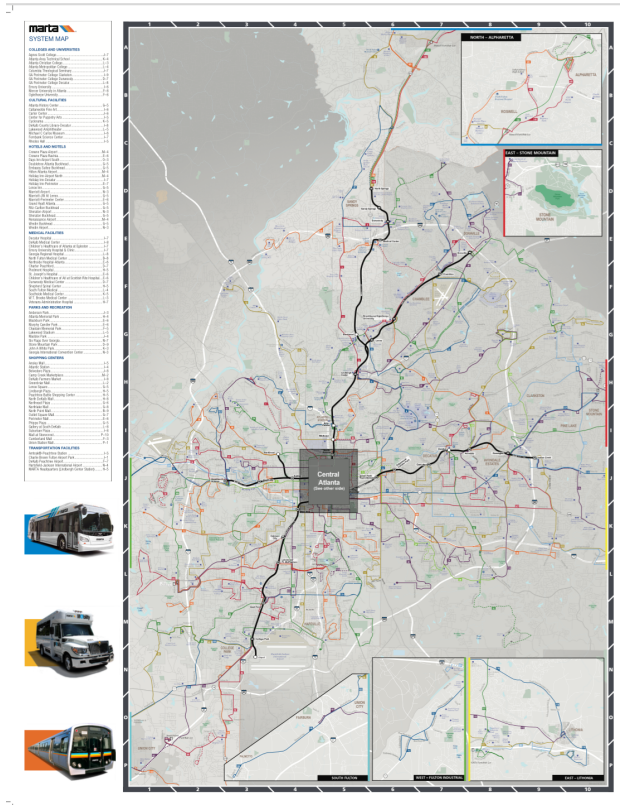
They're actually advertising an Android app, in their iOS app, in the official screenshot. Needless to say, I don't think the app is inline with Apple's iOS 8 Human Interface Guidelines.

My web design and app development skills are pretty limited, but I'd like to present a series of detailed mockups for a web and mobile app redesign. For a far more complex system, Transport for London has a vastly superior website that serves as a lovely model of what a transit website can be.



Problem 3: Maps

I discussed this earlier with signage, but it's worth mentioning again. My brother recently pointed out to me that MARTA does, in fact, have a bus route map. To be more specific, they have four bus maps. They look like this:



Things worth pointing out: I have never seen this anywhere and I lived in Atlanta for more than 18 years, and they've split the system into multiple maps.

I have absolutely no experience with mapping but I'm dumb enough to think that I can do this better. I think that through a more geometric, rather than strictly geographic map, it would be entirely possible to fit all the bus routes onto a single legible map. Atlanta's a pretty huge city, but it's

also really sprawling. From some early experimentation, I think it would be feasible to expand the midtown and downtown areas and shrink the areas closer to the perimeter. Boston has done this pretty successfully with their T map, and even though I'd be handling 80 or so routes instead of 4 lines, I still think it'd be do-able. We'll see. Worst case scenario I take the existing rail map and make it prettier. But I'd like to make a practical bus map, because as I've said, the system is pretty much unusable without busses. Perhaps the solution is to simply use Google Maps—this is not, in fact, a bad strategy for getting around, but I don't like a system that relies on a third party, especially when that party's main goal is to acquire all of your personal information. I'm positive there's a way Atlanta's bus routes can be mapped that makes them easier to use than they are now.

Problem 4: Payment

MARTA's Breeze Card program is pretty convoluted. For one thing, Breeze Card has its own website from MARTA. This goes back to the web presence thing, and is yet another mess I'll clean up. Despite having its own website, I can't seem to find anything on there about how much it actually costs to ride MARTA. That's on the MARTA website, not the Breeze Card website.

One of my favorite things is that MARTA explains fares in terms of one trip (\$2.50), a roundtrip (\$5.00), or 10 trips (\$25.00), as if there's some sort of discount—which there's not—or perhaps they're under the impression that their passengers are incapable of basic multiplication. Furthermore, when you approach a Breeze Card machine, you're given the option to add cash value or purchase rides. There is, in fact, no functional difference between the two, other than that if you load your card with cash and then with rides, the rides aren't visible until the cash is depleted. I will probably redesign the Breeze Card machine interface because that ought to be pretty easy, and restructure the fare system while I'm at it, to make it easier to understand without changing how much people are actually paying to get on a bus or train. Speaking of...

If it ain't broke, don't fix it (and other principles I'm probably going to stick to).

I said that MARTA has all the components of a usable system, and I believe that. Because of this, and because I lack background in urban planning, I won't be physically altering any of the routes. I don't think it's necessary, and I don't think I'm familiar enough with the entire city to plan bus routes that traverse neighborhoods I've never really been to. I won't be changing what it costs to ride MARTA—if you were to fall into some Rip Van Winkle-esque sleep before I redesigned MARTA and woke up afterwards, the system would still work as you knew it. This should hopefully keep me tied to a redesign that's actually feasible—amounting, mostly, to a fresh coat of paint. Except the paint has design super-powers.

Overall aesthetics are perhaps worth discussing, as this is, after all, a graphic design project. As the title would suggest, the new visual scheme I'm implementing will be **so fresh and so clean**. Flat, bright colors. No gradients, no drop shadows because it's fucking 2015. DIN for typography (except for the logo, which I've designed using Monroe, my own typeface) because it was designed for legibility by Germans. Grid systems everywhere. I may draw a series of icons, or I may rip off a few where necessary from the Noun Project, but if I do go that route, I'll at least curate the icons so they follow a consistent design language because that's what I've been taught to do for the past three and a half years.

I'd say that's a pretty solid foundation, but I'm not yet out of ideas. The thing I like most about this

capstone is that it's very easily scalable to what I can accomplish in a semester. Together, I anticipate all the components will make for a very impressive capstone indeed, but if it gets to the night before the senior show and I'm not thrilled with my iPhone app, for instance, I can drop it without detracting from the overall project. Conversely, if I come up with new ideas as I go, I can implement them as time allows. I have a few "if I get around to them" ideas that I'd like to flesh out a bit more here.

M[art]a

Pending a name that can actually be spoken, I want to make the experience of actually being on buses and trains more enjoyable. Boston and New York have both had campaigns like this, and I imagine they're pretty easy to pull off. Imagine a collaboration between organizations like the Woodruff Arts Center (which encompasses the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, High Museum of Art, and the Alliance Theatre), Living Walls, high schools with successful arts programs like Grady (my alma mater!), North Atlanta, and Carver, and college art and design programs at Georgia Tech and SCAD—not to mention prominent contemporary artists like Catlanta or R. Land to name some of my favorites...the point I'm getting at is that Atlanta has a **really** vibrant arts community, and a program like M[art]a could serve as a platform for artistic expression in heretofore unexplored spaces around the city. It could be as major as commissioning street artists and muralists to paint entire subway stations, or as little as replacing some of the ads on MARTA with art (and that's why I'm not a business major). The trains even have LCD screens that could be used as a canvas for all kinds of interactive and time-based art. The possibilities on this one are really endless.

An advertising component

A good friend of mine is studying advertising at the University of Georgia—as I understand it, they have a pretty solid ad program. We’ve discussed in the past collaborating on a project, and I think a very sensible extension of my capstone would be solving the problem of how to explain to the general public what’s going on. At this point, I don’t quite know what those would look like, although I think it’s safe to say that most of them would appear in MARTA stations, and obviously they would share an aesthetic with the actual redesign.

Git up, get out, and git something

There’s a lot about this project that I won’t know until I start work on it. I’ve never undertaken a project of this scale before, nor have I ever worked on way-finding design. It’s covering a lot of new ground, but I’m confident that the skills I’ve spent my college career developing will serve me well in bettering a system in a city I care so much for, and which has such incredible potential. Atlanta has had so much promising urban development in the past 5 years, and I hope I get to play a small part—through this and future projects—in what happens in Atlanta during the next 50. It’s going to be great.