


### 1.3 The art of noticing: take an icon walk

#### Objective

An icon is a great example of a very simple, minimalistic design that is supposed to give clear and strong indications of possible or allowed courses of action. Icons are supposed to significantly and powerfully compress information to provide clear indications with the parsimony of signs. For this reason, the correct interpretation of an icon depends on the user's ability to unzip the information contained in the icon and apply it correctly. In this exercise, you will learn how to identify effective icons in their ability to compress information and convey clear indications.

#### Instructions

1. Take a stroll in a public place of your choice. Possible options could be your school or office building or other public facility, a neighbourhood in your city, a bus or subway ride, etc.
2. Collect as many examples as possible of icons from the ones you encounter during your stroll.
3. Take notes and sketch the ones you find most interesting or effective (at least 3).
4. Fill the following table for the top three icons (the first line is filled with an example you can erase).

| Icon  | Design features<br>What the icon says (course of action the icon suggests)  | What the icon does not say<br>(and the user needs to know to interpret the icon correctly)  | Why is the icon effective<br>(or not that effective, e.g. confusing)  |
|---|---|---|---|
| New York city <sup>1</sup> subway line icons<br><br> | <p>Line icons are circular or diamond shapes in which the colour represents the line and the number a train service running over that line. Contrast is used to make the sign highly readable (dark colour-white symbol or, light colour-black symbol).</p> <p>The icon indicates the train service and the line through letters or numbers.</p> <p>The shape indicates the type of service (round for regular, diamond for rush hour), the colour the line, the number or letter the express or local trains running on that line.</p> | <p>Users need to know or read the train line and direction from another source.</p> <p>Users need to know why some numbers go together (trains sharing a same line, local VS express trains, regular VS rush hour service).</p> | <p>Why some lines are denominated with letters, why other with numbers?</p> <p>Why both symbols and colours are used?</p> <p>Wouldn't it be simpler to call them the green line, the red line, etc.</p> |
|   |   |   |   |

<sup>1</sup> You can learn more about the design of the New York subway maps and signage by the Italian designer Massimo Vignelli in the book by E. Ponzi, *The Great New York Subway Map*, published by the NYC Museum of Modern Art

|  |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |