



Sign of metro station in Oslo

# Taking the T

What do the underground transit systems of Boston, Stockholm and Oslo all have in common? They have a nearly identical visual identity, the T-shaped symbol, that helps riders navigate the cities with ease.

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Since the late 19th century, rapid transit systems have played an increasingly important role in transporting people around many of the world's major metropolitan cities. By consolidating and moving traffic to a designated right-of-way—typically underground—in their respective urban cores, these systems provided a solution to the chaos and congestion created by multitudes of competing horse-drawn streetcars, overhead catenary-powered trolleys and cable car services.

Dating to 1863, London's system is the world's oldest while more recent systems include those of Helsinki and Copenhagen, which opened in 1982 and 2002 respectively, and dozens of systems—both above and below ground—have opened in developing nations over the past 20 years. The presence and iconography of each system inevitably influences the perception and identity of its host city and vice versa; some have become particularly famous throughout the world. London has its ubiquitous Underground, nicknamed The Tube. New York has the one and only New York City Subway. Berlin has its well-known U-Bahn.

And while perhaps not quite as world-renowned as these examples, the systems in Boston, Stockholm and Oslo each maintain a unique degree of shared synonymity and identity with their respective Ts. That's because the rapid transit system in each of these three cities is visually branded by a capital letter T centered within a circle.

## The Three Ts

In Boston, the T essentially stands for "transportation" and is linked to the one found in MBTA (the official abbreviation for the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority), the entity that maintains and operates the system. In Stockholm and Oslo, the T each stands for "tunnel," representing the first letter of the official name of both systems: the Tunnelbana in Stockholm and the Tunnelbane in Oslo. In these three cities, locals do not talk about taking the "metro" or the "subway" from point A to point B; they instead take "The T" or the "T-Bana/T-bane."

Having first opened in 1897, Boston's system is not only substantially older than both Stockholm's (opened in 1950) and Oslo's (opened in 1966) but was also the first electrified underground transit system to open in the United States and the fourth in the world. London's Underground made the transition from steam-powered to electric-powered in 1890 (thereby eliminating the awful black smoke that had previously filled its tunnels and vastly improving the rider experience) and

Budapest and Glasgow each opened their electrified underground systems in 1896.

But while Boston's system predates those in Stockholm and Oslo by more than half a century, the T symbol was never a part of its identity until the 1960s, when a team of architects tasked with improving every aspect of the system's by-then outdated and confusing aesthetics essentially copied the symbol from Stockholm.

## A Design from Stockholm

The earliest version of the T symbol had already been in use in Stockholm for three decades by this time. Although the modern incarnation of the Stockholm Tunnelbana as a rapid transit system did not open until 1950 with its first line that connected Slussen in the city center to the suburban neighborhood of Hökarängen, its precursor had been active since 1933.

Known as Södertunneln (The Southern Tunnel), this tunnel connected Slussen via Södra Bantorget (now Medborgarplatsen) to Ringvägen (now known as Skanstull; this stop lies along the route towards Hökarängen) and provided a dedicated route separate from street traffic for two existent streetcar lines that serviced the city's southern suburbs.

The architect tasked with designing the Medborgarplatsen and Skanstull stations at this time was Holger Blom, who also left his stamp on the city with his design of Svampen ("The Mushroom," an iconic structure in Stockholm's fashionable Östermalm neighborhood) and the centrally-located park of Tegnérulunden, a project that he co-designed with Erik Glemme while serving as the city of Stockholm's official landscape architect.

During the design phase of Södertunneln and its stations, Blom contacted his graphic designer and painter friend, Kalle Lodén, and hired him to develop the logo for the new underground



Holger Blom



service with these instructions: "Det versala T:et i klar citrongul färg samt 'tunnelbanan' i vit text på svart botten." ("The capital T in clear lemon-yellow with 'tunnelbanan' in

white text on a black background.”) Lodén delivered and variations of the symbol have been in use in Stockholm ever since. Notable evolutions include the symbol’s first use on three-sided signs in 1952 to identify the new Tunnelbana station entrances and its first instance of illumination and reliance on a blue color scheme in 1958.

### Oslo Takes Its Cue

While the T symbol originated in Stockholm as part of the development of the city’s precursor to the Tunnelbana, the first tunnel and underground transit line of any sort to open in Scandinavia occurred in Oslo in 1928, only three years after the city dropped its former name of Kristiania. A long time in the making, construction on Oslo’s precursor to the Tunnelbane began in 1912 but was paused due to complicated legal disputes that resulted from damage to buildings that occurred in the process.

When it finally opened after construction resumed, the Undergrunnsbanen connected Majorstuen, a neighborhood west of the Royal Palace and adjacent to Frogner Park and Vigeland Sculpture Park, to Nationaltheatret in the heart of the city’s center. When



the Oslo City Council decided to build the Tunnelbane in 1954, it chose to model its system on Stockholm’s, and 12 years later the first line opened, connecting Jernbanetorget—where the main Oslo Sentralstasjon is today—to the southeastern suburb of Bergkrystallen.

### A Redesign for Boston

In 1965, one year before Oslo’s Tunnelbane opened, the MBTA hired CambridgeSeven Associates to rework the graphic design, wayfinding, lighting, and general appearance of the Boston system, which had become very disorganized and poorly maintained by this time. The team, lead by architects Peter Chermayeff and Tom Geismar, worked on the project for five years,

developing extensive standards to improve the system, ranging from station aesthetics, system maps, and of course, the T symbol itself.

Chermayeff and Geismar felt that the T symbol would lend a coherent sense of identity to the system because the letter T possesses strong connotations with many relevant words associated with it—transportation, transit, tunnel, tube—and of course, it had already been proven to be successful in Stockholm and Oslo had just adopted its use as well.

While clearly modeled on Stockholm’s symbol, Geismar developed the specifics of the standards for the symbol to be used in Boston—such as its font, color, and proportions of letter size to size of the surrounding circle. So while Boston’s symbol derived its appearance from Stockholm’s, it is not exactly identical.

The team also developed a new system map and manner of identifying its different lines. Prior to this time, the system lines were identified primarily by their terminal stations. Chermayeff created a new color scheme to officially distinguish the lines, and thanks to this innovation, passengers now ride the Red Line to Harvard where the university color is crimson, the Green Line through Fenway and the Emerald Necklace of parks, or the Blue Line along the coast.

### Helping Riders Navigate

Stockholm and Oslo both eventually followed suit and have color-coded their systems’ lines as well, with Stockholm in particular relying on the colors for identification of its lines while Oslo still maintains a stronger emphasis on the numbering of its lines. All three systems employ topological maps inspired by the original created by Harry Beck for the London Underground in 1931, which applied colors to the system lines for ease of legibility but did not designate the colors themselves as an official sort of identity for each line as is the case in Boston and Stockholm.

The implementation of the changes suggested by Chermayeff and Geismar made the Boston system much more comprehensible for its users—and gave it its now iconic identity. Few people who live in or near Boston or who have visited the city and made use of the system realize that the Boston T isn’t original.

The Ts in Stockholm and Oslo were already up and running before the United States’ oldest underground system joined their shared sense of visual identity. But that identity does its job well and provides an incredibly effective visual cue to help navigate each of the three cities: whenever anyone visits Boston, Stockholm, or Oslo and needs to utilize the transit system, he or she just simply needs to look for the circular symbol of the T. ▼

#### Why The Letter T?

It possesses strong connotations with many relevant words associated with the system—transportation, transit, tunnel and tube.

