



## **The design history of the GO Transit logo**

By Greg Cunneynworth

Edited By: Professor Alex Bitterman

This past summer, I had the honour of working closely with Italian-American master designer, Massimo Vignelli. Massimo told me, “good design should be invisible.” This certainly holds true for environmental graphics design as well as wayfinding communication signs because these elements of design should not call any attention to them and should just function—especially in busy cities and airports. However, the ideation that ‘good’ design should be ‘invisible’ is not true for logograms.

Logos need to be highly visible to busy consumers in order to do their job and function effectively. They are incredibly important to a company as they are the tangible representation of a brand, corporation or intangible service. Sometimes logos bring not only attention to the company but fame to the designer. Most all contemporary design-creatives know that Paul Rand is the creative force behind the very successful ABC, IBM and Westinghouse logograms. Likewise, most Canadian creatives know that Burton Kramer as the designer of the original CBC logo and Allan Fleming as designer of the Canadian National Railway logo. Some logos, in contrast, have a relatively short life-span and aren’t quite as successful as others. However a select few are just simply overlooked and under appreciated; the GO Transit logo is absolutely one of these. Despite its incredibly high visibility in Canada’s most populated city, Toronto, it still has not been fully recognized as what it truly takes on.



*A current GO Train with the logo on the front.  
Image source: [www.anadiandesignresource.com](http://www.anadiandesignresource.com)*

Over time, the GO Transit logo has become somewhat “invisible” to the public eye and is in my opinion overlooked by the Canadian design community. Last year alone, 50 million people hopped on and off the GO Train, one of North America’s premier transportation services to and from the city of Toronto. The logo has become an indelible component of the urban fabric of Toronto and eminent recognition to the crown corporation—an enviable goal that most graphic designers strive to accomplish with any logo they design. Despite the fact that ‘Torontonians’ see the logo all over the city of Toronto and on the side of GO trains every time they drive by on Highway 401, the green logo is still generally ignored and taken for granted. Why is this the case, and how come the history and the designer until now, has been largely unknown? It is the answer to these questions that I set out to uncover, with the hope to share my findings with both the Canadian and international design community.

I began to research the GO Transit logo when I was driving through Toronto, after my third year studying graphic design and design history at the Rochester Institute of Technology. I wondered as I drove by, who designed the incredible GO logo? My online research was unsuccessful; as I did not find anything I was looking for. I thought how could this be? If one were to enter “Canadian National Railway logo+design,” the search would return Allan Fleming as the designer, along with a biography of him. Though for GO Transit...it was difficult to find anything about the information on the designer or its history. I then contacted the company directly and uncovered more information through phone calls and e-mails from the Supervisor of Corporate Communications & Media Relations as well as the Advertising Director at GO Transit. Another key source I used for initial research, is a blog called The Canadian Design Resource, which contains a significant amount of information on Canadian design. A posting about the GO Transit logo in 2006 gave no designer credit until August 22, 2008 when a post was made by Martha Fleming, Allan Fleming’s daughter, crediting Frank Fox for the design. This was the first true on-line public credit; Frank Fox has received for the design.

A few weeks before the post Martha Fleming made on CDR blog, Frank Fox was kind enough to respond to an e-mail I sent asking him questions with regard to the GO logogram. In it he disclosed the logo’s history and about the company he worked for, Gangon/Valkus.

He says “over the years [Gagnon/Valkus] had developed a good working relationship with the advertising agency, McConnell Eastman. They were the ad agency for CN and had the contract to produce an brand for the Ontario government and the new transit system for the city of Toronto. With the support of CN, Gagnon/ Valkus was given a contract to develop the [GO Transit logo] under the umbrella of McConnell Eastman.”

The GO logo is essentially unchanged from its original release of its 1967 design; a true test of timelessness and a rare occasion among the Twentieth and twenty-first century logos. The design works perfectly well in today’s blackberry typing and texting world due to its extreme simplicity and symbolic concept behind it. It has only gone under one minor revision a few months after its original release. Before the revision, the logogram that was first released had the ‘G’ and ‘O’ slightly touching. Today, a gap between the two letters and a white ‘T’ distinguishes the ‘G’ and the ‘O’.

At the time the design was made for GO Transit, Frank Fox was working with a company called Gagnon/Valkus, a New York based office owned by Jim Valkus. Jim opened the office in Montreal and partnered with painter/filmmaker/designer Charles Gagnon, to develop the CN corporate identity as well as to compete for Expo ‘67 contracts. Mr. Fox modestly states in his e-mail sent to me, “A lot of the work in the office was done in a collaborative way. This meant that ideas and concepts were developed in an atmosphere of team spirit. The GO symbol evolved very much in that manner.” Jean Mornin was also one of the designers working at the Gagnon/Valkus office and as Mr. Fox admits, was “a key person during the design process and should also be given credit.”

A statement in an online historical text achieve, called Building GO-Transit: The Rail Commuter Initiative of The Government of Ontario & Canadian National Railways, People in the project 1965-1969, Frank remembers how the team came to a quick resolution to the project. They wanted to bring the initials of the Government of Ontario, into a unified logo. “I started working on it conceptually right away. We started thumbnail sketches and in one of those surprising things that happens every now and again, the actual concept of the GO symbol came up very quickly. We were thinking of two circles with a letter “T” somewhere in them. We had cut out two circles, then literally put a square into the circle, then “Bingo”, there was the G, in green, and we could lay a white “T” on it.”



*The original GO Transit Logo shown above has the ‘G’ and the ‘O’ touching.*



**“Sometimes that happens in design, a happy accident. More or less, we had this feeling among us that this couldn’t be true. We went off trying many other solutions, but nothing else was good enough.”**

*A BliLevel Railcars designed by Hawker Siddeley Canada Inc. (above)  
Image source: [www.anadiandesignresource.com](http://www.anadiandesignresource.com)*

“Sometimes that happens in design, a happy accident. More or less, we had this feeling among us that this couldn’t be true. We went off trying many other solutions, but nothing else was good enough. I know we were surprised, this thing happened rather quickly. We played with the proportions a bit, because we did not want the overlying “T” to disappear, when the logo would be reduced in size.”

Soon after the final draft was finished, Mr, Fox states, “We made a presentation to McConnell Eastman in Toronto of the original concept, showing the GO symbol and it’s potential application. The development of the concept, etc. was a collaborative effort by members of the Gagnon/Valkus office. After that presentation and [an] OK from the client, McConnell Eastman took over from Gagnon/Valkus and our role diminished.” However the genius functionality and design has not. This history however unfortunately did. But in the eyes of the company, it still is a dominant and successful corporate identity logogram. Clearly it has worked for them as they have never seen anything else represent their company—an amazing accomplishment by Frank Fox and the design team at Gagnon Valkus.

The GO logo is truly a design that should have been more publicly credited a long time ago within the design community due to the success it had immediately after the release. The company has been incredibly successful for many decades. The logogram is an incredible specimen of modernism in design as it stays true to its form and communicates everything it needs to quickly and efficiently; a must for a fast-paced, high-tech company. It is a logo that represents the pinnacle of Canadian modernist designers strive to accomplish. Like the CN logo, and even the ABC and IBM logos, it should continue to withstand the test of time for many more decades to come. The next time you commute from Oakville to Union Station on those little green trains we all know as the GO Trains, you can thank Frank Fox for that image we all see each day that hopefully isn’t so ‘invisible’ anymore.

## **About the Author:**

Greg Cunneyworth is a 21 year old, fourth year Graphic design student attending the Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, NY.

He is a American born, Canadian citizen and has lived in multiple cities in the U.S. and Canada. He currently is receiving his Bachelor of Fine arts in Graphic design and a minor in Marketing.

Greg is interested in all aspects of design and enjoys photography as well. He plans on working in a design studio or advertising firm when he graduates in May 2009.

Greg can be reached via e-mail at [gwc7494@rit.edu](mailto:gwc7494@rit.edu) and you can view his work on his portfolio website at [www.gregcunneyworth.com](http://www.gregcunneyworth.com)

## Sources

### Online Journal:

Building GO-Transit: The Rail Commuter Initiative of The Government of Ontario & Canadian National Railways, People in the project 1965-1969  
<http://www.historicaltextarchive.com/books.php?op=viewbook&bookid=63&cid=4>

### Book:

GO Transit: Government of Ontario Transit— A new approach to urban transportation

### Personal e-mails:

From Frank Fox  
From: [frankf@ns.sympatico.ca](mailto:frankf@ns.sympatico.ca)  
Subject: Re: Go Transit logo!  
Date: August 13, 2008 10:49:30 AM  
To: [gwc7494@rit.edu](mailto:gwc7494@rit.edu)

From Jessica Kosmack  
From: [Jessica.Kosmack@gotransit.com](mailto:Jessica.Kosmack@gotransit.com)  
Subject: RE: GO Transit – logo design & history  
Date: July 22, 2008 1:47:17 PM EDT  
To: [gwc7494@rit.edu](mailto:gwc7494@rit.edu)

### Web:

[www.gotransit.com](http://www.gotransit.com)

[www.canadiandesignresource.ca/officialgallery](http://www.canadiandesignresource.ca/officialgallery)

<http://research.scottrade.com/public/markets/news/news.asp?docKey=100-235c6931-1&section=headlines>