



# LID LESSONS

## A MANHOLE COVER DESIGN MANIFESTO

# A Manhole Cover Manifesto

by Jason Lempieri

Historically, manhole covers, whether for utilities or coal delivery, have done more than function as lids. With their raised, site-specific designs, cover illustrations of yore were gripping both to the foot and the eye. This was most evident in covers installed in Victorian era London, older cities in the USA and Eastern Europe. Western Europe caught on in the inter-war years, and Japan has emerged as a leader in the thoughtfulness of manhole cover art since the introduction of the “Chasing Fish” cover for Naha, Okinawa. Unfortunately, designs in the USA largely became an afterthought during the Cold War years. Pragmatism, corporate visual illiteracy and outsourcing with no oversight have deprived many urban streets of the delight that covers can place at our feet.

If designed well, manhole covers can do their job while also benefiting the municipality where they sit. Manhole cover art has enjoyed renewed and growing interest on social media, and its use in on-site art projects such as rubbings, printed works on canvas and fabric, and houseware designs is on the rise. The glorious Japanese covers are a perfect example of this: the covers, some of which are color enameled, attract tourists who then post the designs on social media. This creates free advertising for the municipality and utility, while creating more tourism. Yet, in many places pragmatic designs are par for the course and are essentially missed opportunities.



*London, Camden Town  
Victorian era  
coal chute cover.*



*Naha, Okinawa, 1977.  
The face that launched  
at thousand Japanese  
covers.*

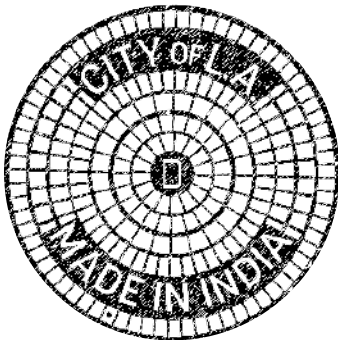


*Hakone, Japan  
A pictorial cover for a  
town of 11,300 people.*

Given the potential for covers to make a lasting impression and drive more interest in their location, municipalities and utilities need to reevaluate their approach when replacing covers. Accordingly, here are guidelines for what a good cover can be and how utilities, municipalities and designers can work together to bring the art that is underfoot to the fore.

### **Hire a Designer**

Logistics, implementation and standards should be overseen by municipal employees. The foundry should handle manufacturing and transportation. The designer is the liaison between those organizations and should be the only source for the visual layout of the cover. While some foundries have in-house designers, engaging an outside designer for the project avoids recycled designs and design by committee, which can result in ephemeral designs.



*Los Angeles India  
What happens when  
you leave the design to  
outside sources.*

### **Work within the Geometric Constraints**

If the cover is circular, then a design with a polar array should be a constraint. In a rectangular

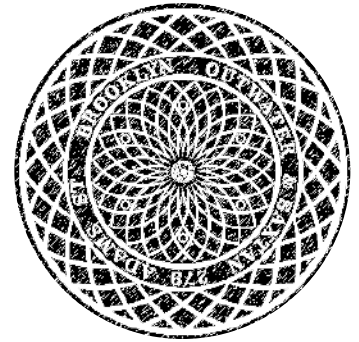


*New Castle County  
City seal leaves much to  
be desired.*

cover, an orthogonal layout is recommended. Consider the directional orientation and context around a rectangular cover if a landscape or portrait motif is dominant. If designing an abstracted pattern, be mindful of pattern and proportions.

### Communication Is Critical

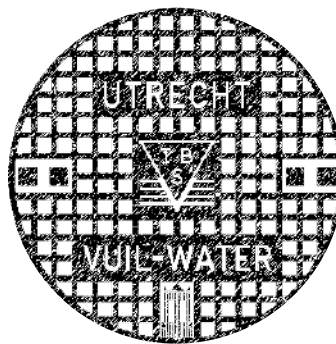
The overall design of a manhole cover needs to communicate not only to the utility worker, but also to the pedestrian, whether denizen or tourist. It needs to answer some critical questions: What is the cover for? In which municipality is it found? Is its design specific to a district in that municipality? Who designed it? What are the classifications and specifications? Where is it manufactured and by whom?



*Brooklyn Outwater  
An intersecting spiral  
pattern on an old coal  
chute cover.*



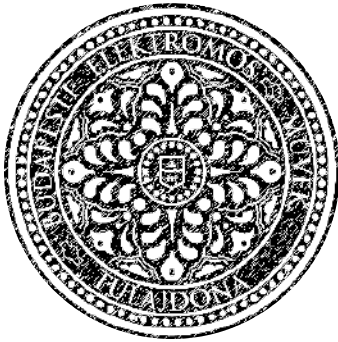
*Valencia, Spain  
No doubt where this if  
from.*



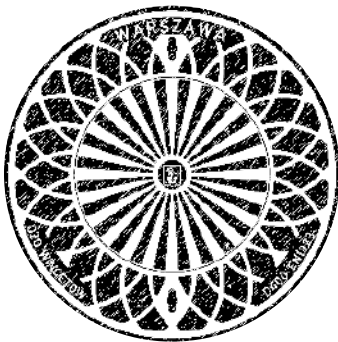
*Utrecht, NL  
The grid allows for  
designated information &  
use areas.*



*Auckland, NZ  
An educational pictorial  
cover becomes a game in  
its context.*



*Budapest, Hungary  
A radial symmetrical  
graphic is contained by a  
ring of text.*



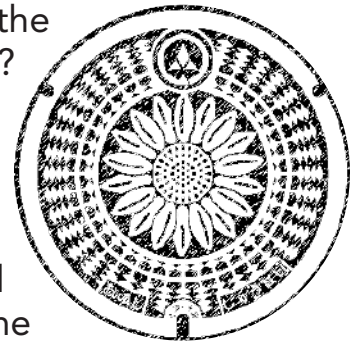
*Warsaw, Poland  
Note the "meat"  
provided in the pattern  
for pick point holes.*

## Organize Components Systematically

Because there is so much information that needs to be displayed on the cover, legibility is paramount. Consider using a ring or border that encircles the core illustration and evenly displays the communicative elements. Space should be allotted for the pick points to ensure that there is a sufficient margin for foundry adjustments.

## Say It Without Saying It

When laying out a cover, should the design be abstract or representative? Pictorial covers are representative and ride the fine line of kitsch. Throwing the city seal in the center is a standard method and crowd-pleaser, but if that original graphic is poor to begin with the resulting cover will underwhelm. An abstracted pattern can be quite beautiful but may lose resonance. In theory, an abstracted pattern allows the cover to be placed in multiple locations, but that ubiquity can dilute the cover's overall visual power. A cover that has an artful representative approach is a good blend and allows for contextuality. If the location has a decent mark, that can be used instead of text. That saves room and provides a nice element in an on-site rubbing.



*Ono, Japan  
The village of 48,000  
grows sunflowers &  
fabricates abaci.  
Note the city emblem.*

## Say It With consistency

A consistent typeface is key to a legible and well formatted cover. This goes for all elements--function, location, specification standards and manufacturing location. Changing the scale of the typeface creates a hierarchy and the aforementioned, descending order seems appropriate. Sans serif typefaces work best at larger scales. Varying fonts can be used for emphasis. (Typefaces are the characteristic letterforms and fonts are the family variations of a typeface, such as italics, bold, rounded, narrow, etc.)

## Design Selection

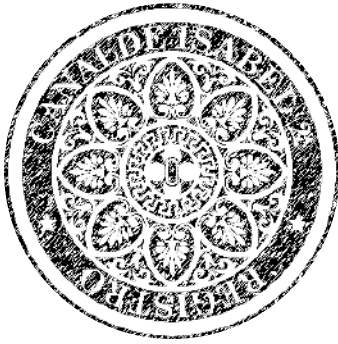
As stated, manhole cover design and selection are highly subjective and best left to qualified visual artists. If there is a competition for the design of a cover, then the entire jury needs to be visually literate and composed of stakeholders who share and value the undertaking. The public can be invited to winnow the selections and provide commentary, but the final selection should be made by a jury composed of a majority of guest artists, in addition to representatives from the community, utility and municipality. Lastly, use the selection process as an opportunity to promote all involved.



*Houston, TX  
The kitchen sink  
approach and the central  
motif will not age well.*



*Vancouver, BC  
This winning design  
features native  
amphibians in a rotational  
array. Steam emerges  
from the four holes.*



Madrid, Spain  
An older cover found on  
the podium of the Reina  
Sofia Art Museum.



Tokyo, Japan  
Ginkgo couplets form a  
diagonal pattern. Note  
the central city emblem  
and the utility text in the  
large pickpoint zone.

## Implementation

When covers are replaced, the older covers should be documented for historical consideration. A rubbing and a high resolution photograph should be made for the archives. Foundry information should be researched and documented as well. For new covers that require a set orientation, training and oversight for maintenance crews are critical to ensuring that the cover is set correctly upon each use.

## Timelessness Is A Form Of Sustainability

When covers are designed well they can last for over a century. Cast iron has proven this longevity and should be the go-to material. While cheaper, reinforced plastic covers break and wear faster and should therefore be avoided. Cast iron can be recycled easily and not having to replace a cover for decades is a sustainable enterprise.

## Subjectivity Is A Color: Cast Iron Grey

There are many covers that delight and fall a bit outside of these guidelines. It is all right to move in and out of the rules as long as you get back to the right note at some point. Often an improvisational approach is a great way to start a layout. Now, here is your chance to design and celebrate the art that is *often overlooked, but always underfoot*.

