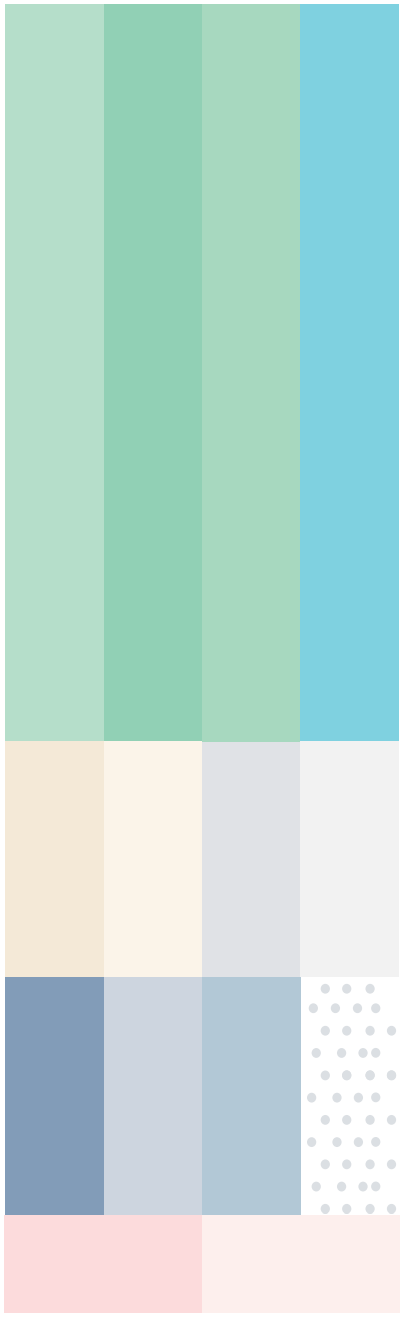
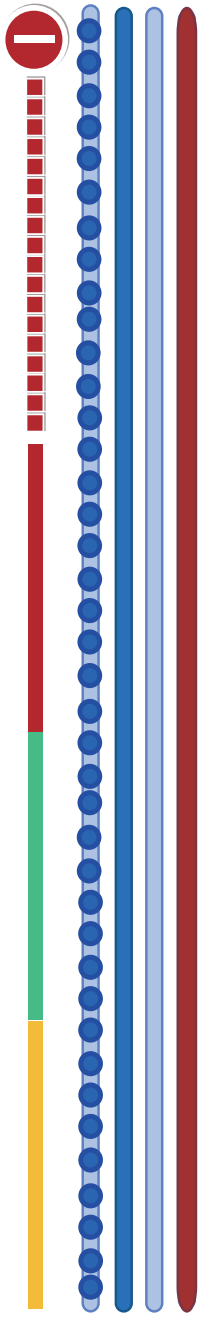
Legend of Google Maps

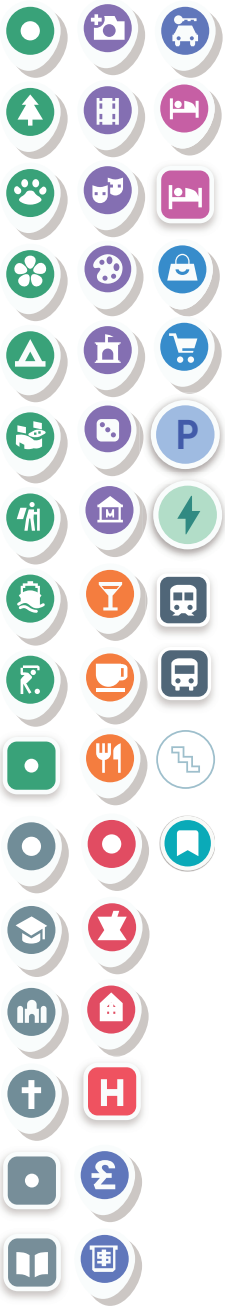
Colours



Lines



Labels

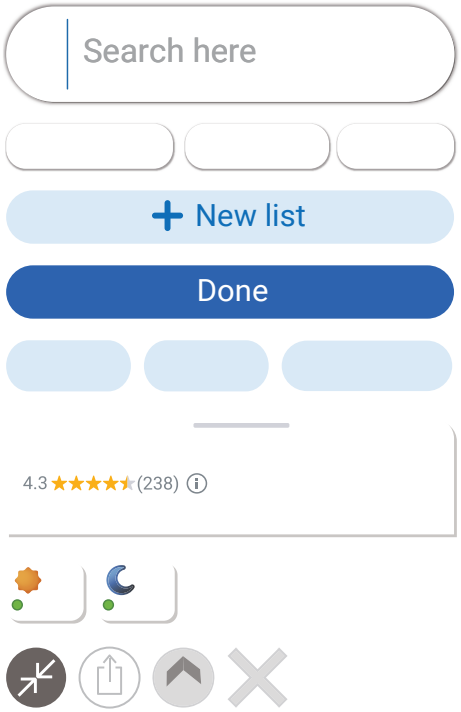


Text Label

A House Number
A Place Name
A Place Name
A Place Name
A Place Name
A Place Name
A Park Name
A Street Name
An Area
A City

Pointers

Interface Prompts



Scale

1000mi
2000km

10ft
2m

Visual Research Behind the

This is the stage of analysis and interpretation that takes place before the visual experiments.

The pedestrian gaze as a metaphorical research method

The designer encounters her own blurred position between communication designer and map user while attempting to understand a system she simultaneously inhabits and critiques — not from above but through a drifting, pedestrian gaze. The pedestrian perspective is not merely a literal point of view, but a metaphorical method of research. It suggests a way of navigating from within — one that is slow, limited, and non-instrumental. This perspective helps the designer evoke multiple experiences and identities in the investigation: the mapper, the cartographer, the map user, the city dweller, and the traveller.

In this particular study, rather than following the logic of efficiency embedded in the interface, the designer chooses to drift through it: zooming in to the point of pixelation, manually sampling colours, taking screenshots, and enlarging fragments. As the scale is pushed to its limit, images become blurred, boundaries begin to misalign, and glitches emerge, revealing the otherwise invisible structure of the interface.

The Visual language of google map

Following that approach, the designer studies the visual grammar of Google Maps — its colour conventions, labels, iconography, zooming levels, and layering rules. After noting, redrawing, and diagrammatic analysis, the designer attempts to understand and analyse the visual language of Google Maps from within. These recognitions form the foundation for the designer's intervention for making the map's visual language visible.

Colour

Can a Colour make you feel as if you've entered a space? You recognise a minty green as a park because you've learned to read that green. It's now part of how you associate with the city. A minty green comes to mean open, unbuilt, and accessible space, even if in real life the park may be in darker green, yellower, or even brown in another season. That's the visual language of Google Maps at work: it standardises how we read space by assigning meaning to colour. And that meaning stays with us and quietly guides how we imagine, recognise, and remember urban space.

Translucent and weightless colours are used to differentiate between types of space — and to detach them from the material world: mint green for parks, grey for roads, blue for water, and pale orange or beige for buildings. These colours construct a frictionless, visually safe version of the city that is always reachable, readable, and lit. Even with dark mode available, the map stays in a logic of daylight. The lights never go off.

In this system, grey dominates. It covers roads, pavements, building edges, and unlabelled zones. Light grey defines the base tone of the interface and quietly renders large areas as unimportant — present but not meant to be noticed. Different shades of grey quietly build a hierarchy in your mind: they classify urban space into the accessible, the inaccessible, the built, and the unbuilt. In contrast, both blue and green appear in a single fixed tone — stable, unchanging, nothing to question.

At the core of this colour system lies a visual hierarchy. Readability is prioritised above all else. A subtle but precise mechanism supports this: as you zoom in, the interface does more than reveal detail. It desaturates its base layers to make room for new information, preserving the visual structure of the interface.

Labels

Floating above the space is a layer of high-saturation, opaque labels and markers for place names, transit points, and commercial destinations. These are designed to be seen: the labels brand the space, assign it value, and call for your attention.

Their appearance is strategic and conditional: labels don't appear all at once, but emerge selectively depending on the zoom level. As you move closer, more places of interest surface, forming a dynamic hierarchy controlled by the interface.

While the map scale shifts, the size of the labels remains fixed. A cafe tag or street name stays the same weight and dimension, no matter how far you zoom in. This creates an uncannily flattened experience of reading the city, where spatial depth is subordinated to legibility, and proximity becomes a matter of visibility control rather than physical distance.

This system of visibility is governed by Google's patented smart labelling system, an algorithm that balances clarity, performance, and spatial hierarchy. In other words, the map decides what you should see and when, based on calculated relevance. It's not a passive image but an actively managed interface, constantly curating visibility to guide your perception of space.

Lines

In Google Maps, lines often represent paths, edges, routes, or live traffic conditions.

What's particularly interesting is the tangle of edge lines found at the margins of space: the outlines of pavements or building perimeters sometimes appear oddly displaced, cutting into streets, overlapping with rivers, or hovering where they shouldn't be. But these are not errors. They are absolute logical results of the system, where edge alignments are determined by algorithmic convenience, not geographic exactness. Within this logic, what might appear as visual glitches are entirely permissible — they are quietly embedded in the system. Most users wouldn't notice.

These misaligned lines reveal a hidden order: a city rendered through the efficiency of layered data, compression, and render speed. What emerges is a hyper-structured visual map that accepts misalignments as long as they don't obstruct the interface's core function.

The blue dot

All interface prompts related to the user begin with a calm yet assertive shade of blue. The blue dot, along with blue action buttons don't just locate the user, but indicate presence, agency, and belonging within the system's logic of navigation. The relationship between the user and the blue dots is established through a system of permissions and agreements that allow the interface to represent the user as part of itself.

Once this relationship is established, the digital map platform starts to decode the city into a set of directional instructions tailored to the user's request.The urban space becomes something predictable: to be followed, turned, arrived at, and executed. Now, the users' spatial experience becomes a dual process of reading the language of the map while simultaneously verifying and fitting it against the physical world.

Arrows, routes, and floating markers constitute a clear mediating language that organises, translates, and rewrites the city for its users. For strangers or travellers in particular, this language adopts a more explicit pedagogical function while the symbols become a shareable and operational script. The interface transforms portions of the city into coded, guided pathways, while the rest remains unlabelled, unaddressed, and outside the flow of navigation.

Scale

Here, scale takes on multiple meanings: the cartographic scale

embedded in the interface, granting the user a sense of control over space while simultaneously determining what is visible, when, and to what extent; the data scale behind the map — global in scope, structured across networks; and the interface scale — handheld, mobile, user-centered.

The tensions and synchronisations between these scales shape our experience and perception of urban space. Google Maps' vector-based rendering makes the interface feel continuous and responsive.

It generates the city at your fingertips, centred around the user, creating a spatial perception that is endlessly extendable in every direction. Despite the massive scale of the reality onto which this map projects itself, the interface is remarkably small, just a screen held in one hand. This scale contrast often causes us to misread the map's relationship with both ourselves and the city. What we hold is not the map, but the interface — a portable window that connects us to a 1:1 version of the urban space. It is this interface that allows the map to overlap with, and project itself onto, the physical streets of the city, anytime, anywhere. It exists in a state of real-time misalignment with its surroundings, yet it constantly influences our movement, flow, and perception within the city.

symbols become a shareable and operational script, the one you might find in an Airbnb check-in guide. In doing so, the interface transforms portions of the city into coded, guided pathways, while the rest remains unlabelled, unaddressed, and outside the flow of navigation.