



Map Design

Styles, Expression
and Practicalities.

Illustration for Advertising

What is a Map?

A map is not just a tool for navigation, it is:

- A selective representation of space
- A designed interpretation of reality
- A visual argument about what matters

Every map leaves something out. The act of selection is where illustration can be both expressive and functional.

Purpose

From ancient cartography to contemporary editorial graphics, maps balance:

- Accuracy
- Clarity
- Narrative
- Aesthetic (visual language)

As illustrators, you are not just map-makers, you are world-builders.

The main styles of maps

Let's explore different styles and where creative opportunities lie.

1. Topographic and Survey Maps
2. Political & Administrative Maps
3. Pictorial & Illustrated Maps
4. Fantasy & Fictional Maps
5. Data & Thematic Maps
6. Personal & Emotional Maps

Topographic and survey maps

Examples include national survey systems such as the Ordnance Survey

Characteristics:

- Precise scale
- Contour lines (elevation)
- Measured distances
- Standardized symbols
- Grid systems

Visual language:

- Clean linework
- Limited color palette that works with a key
- Hierarchy through weight and tone

Topographic and survey maps

Creative opportunities:

- Reinterpreting contour lines as pattern
- Layering emotional or narrative elements onto precision
- Hybridizing with hand-drawn textures

Practical considerations:

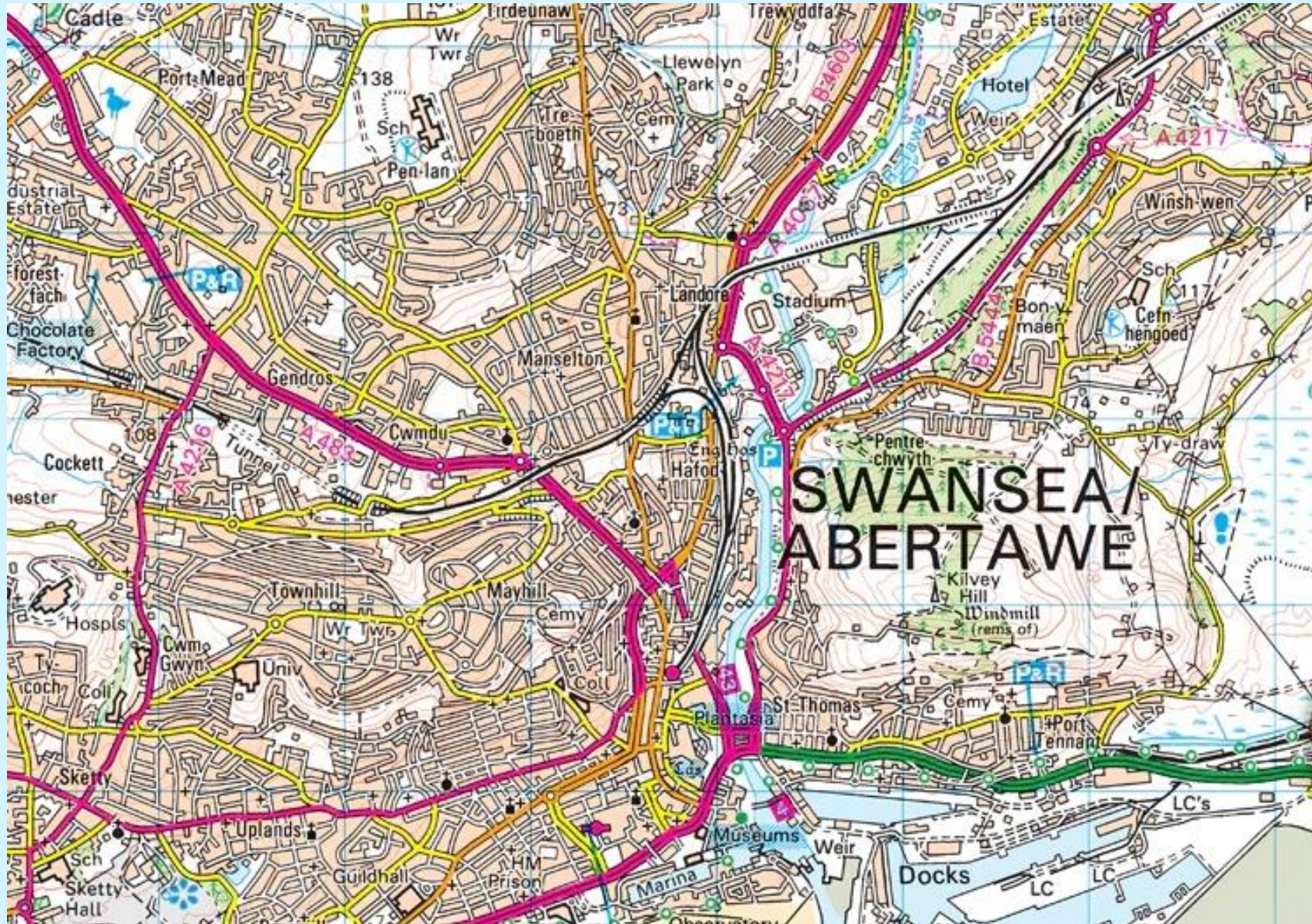
- Scale consistency is critical
- Symbol systems must be readable
- Accuracy expectations are high with this type of map

Topographic map example

In modern mapping, a topographic map or topographic sheet is a type of map characterized by large-scale detail and quantitative representation of relief features



Ordnance Survey



An Ordnance Survey (OS) map is a detailed, accurate, and up-to-date map of Great Britain, produced by Ordnance Survey. Covering the entire country these maps are widely regarded as the "gold standard" for location accuracy. They are used for outdoor navigation, land management, and official planning applications.

Political & Administrative Maps

Examples include country maps, election maps, atlas spreads and these are often seen in publications like National Geographic

Characteristics:

- Borders emphasized
- Color-coded regions
- Focus on governance and territory

Political and administrative maps

Creative opportunities:

- Rethinking how borders are visually expressed
- Using color symbolically (power, tension, unity)
- Challenging the neutrality of political mapping

Practical considerations:

- Borders can be contested
- Cultural sensitivity is essential
- Data must be verified

Example of a political and administrative map: USA



Pictorial and illustrated maps

Historic examples are the 1920s pictorial style popularised by artists like MacDonald Gill.

Characteristics:

- Decorative typography
- Illustrated landmarks
- Playful perspective shifts
- Not strictly to scale

Pictorial and illustrated maps

Creative opportunities:

- Expressive typography
- Character and narrative scenes embedded in geography
- Texture, pattern, whimsy

Practical considerations:

- Legibility versus decoration balance
- Visual hierarchy still required
- Overcrowding is a risk



Children's
pictorial
illustrated
map of the
United
Kingdom.

Fantasy and fictional maps

Examples include *The Lord of the Rings* and *Game of Thrones*.

Characteristics:

- Invented geographies
- Symbolic mountains, forests, seas
- Often aged or parchment aesthetics

Fantasy and fictional maps

Creative opportunities:

- Total world-building freedom
- Symbol systems of your own design
- Emotional geography (danger zones, sacred spaces)

Practical considerations:

- Internal consistency
- Plausible terrain logic
- Clear spatial relationships

Pauline Baynes, who illustrated all of the *Narnia* books, attempts in this poster to capture the geography of the entire series in a single image.



Data and thematic maps

Modern data visualisation map examples appear in publications like *The New York Times*

Characteristics:

- Heat maps
- Choropleth color coding
- Data-driven overlays

Data and thematic maps

Creative opportunities:

- Conceptual color systems
- Blending illustration with infographics
- Turning data into metaphor

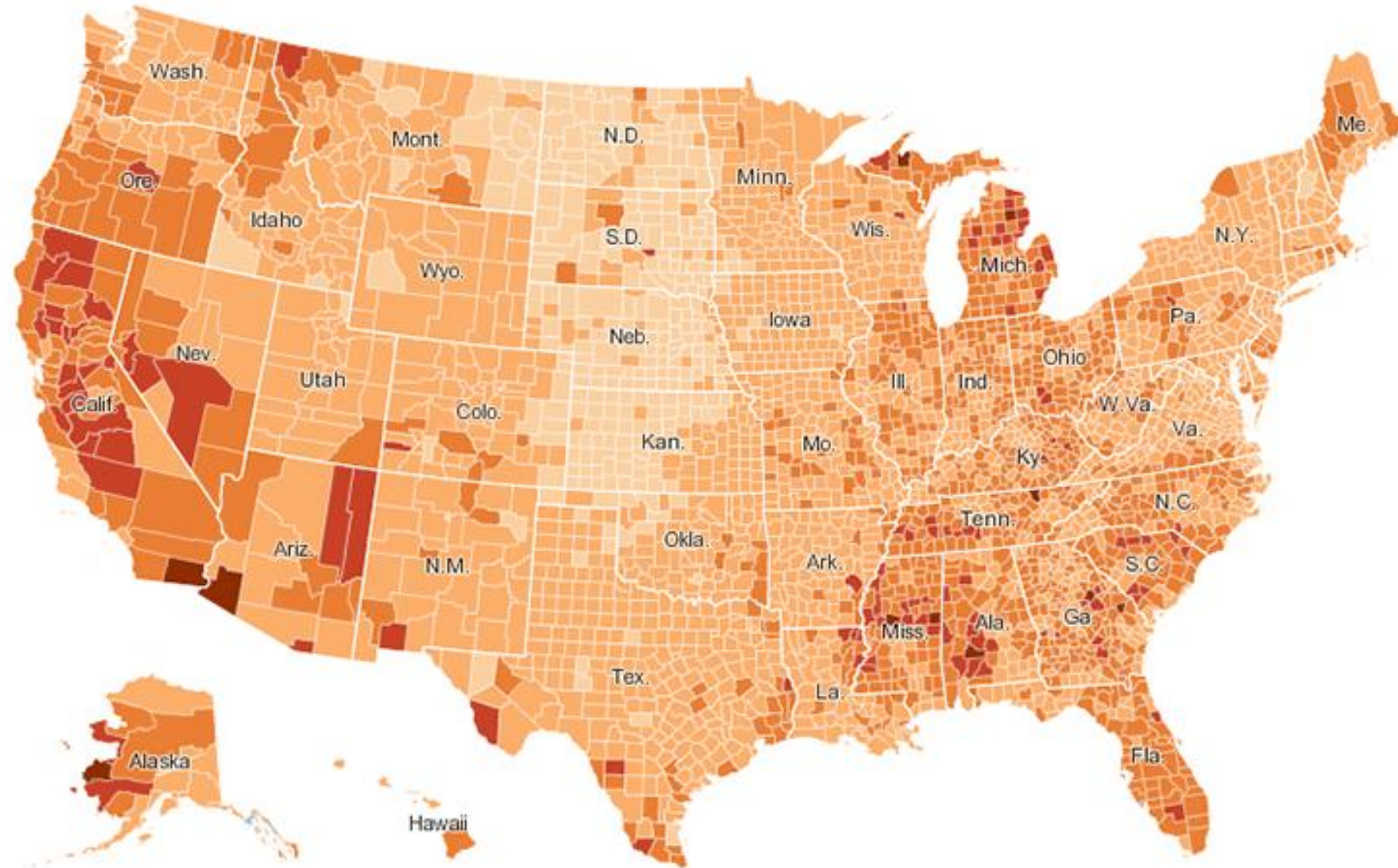
Practical considerations:

- Misleading scales can distort the truth
- Accessibility (consider color blindness, clarity)
- Data integrity is non-negotiable

Unemployment rate



June '10 unemployment rate: **9.6%**
One-year change: -0.1 pct. pts.



A univariate
choropleth map
of unemployment
rates in the United
States.

Source:
*The New York
Times.*

Personal and emotional maps

This style of mapping we have done previously for Dynevor. These are not about geography alone. They map:

- Memories
- Journeys
- Identity
- Sensory experiences or feelings

Examples:

- A map of your childhood home
- A city mapped by smells
- A map of anxiety triggers on campus

Personal and emotional maps

Creative opportunities:

- Mixed media
- Non-linear layouts
- Abstracted symbols

Practical considerations:

- Audience comprehension
- Deciding how much context is required
- Balancing abstraction with clarity

Creative expression in mapping

When creating your Creative Quarter Map consider:

Perspective

- Bird's-eye
- Isometric
- Folded narrative
- Sequential storytelling

Typography

- Integrated into landscape
- Hand-lettered vs digital
- Scale variation for hierarchy

Creative expression in mapping

Materiality and medium

- Ink wash
- Collage
- Risograph texture
- Digital vector
- 3D render hybrids

Narrative Devices

- Characters interacting with landscape
- Annotated marginalia
- Icons as storytelling tools

Practicalities you will need to consider

Scale

If distances distort too much, your map will not be trusted.
Consider:

- Is the map symbolic or navigational?
- What actually is the intended practical use?

Visual Hierarchy

What should the viewer see first? You can influence this with:

- Line weight
- Color contrast
- Typography scale
- Negative space

Practicalities you will need to consider

Accessibility

- Avoid red/green-only contrasts (colour blindness)
- Ensure type is readable at final size (legibility)
- Consider reproduction (print vs screen)

Research

Even stylized maps require:

- Reference imagery
- Spatial understanding
- Cultural awareness

Practicalities you will need to consider

Ethics

Maps are political. They shape our perception of:

- Ownership
- Borders
- Power
- Visibility

Remember maps are authorial. Therefore, as image-makers, you have an ethical responsibility.

Process Stages

Research & Brainstorm

- Identify narrative anchors
- Decide what NOT to include

Visual Language Development

- Design symbol system
- Establish line hierarchy
- Test typography

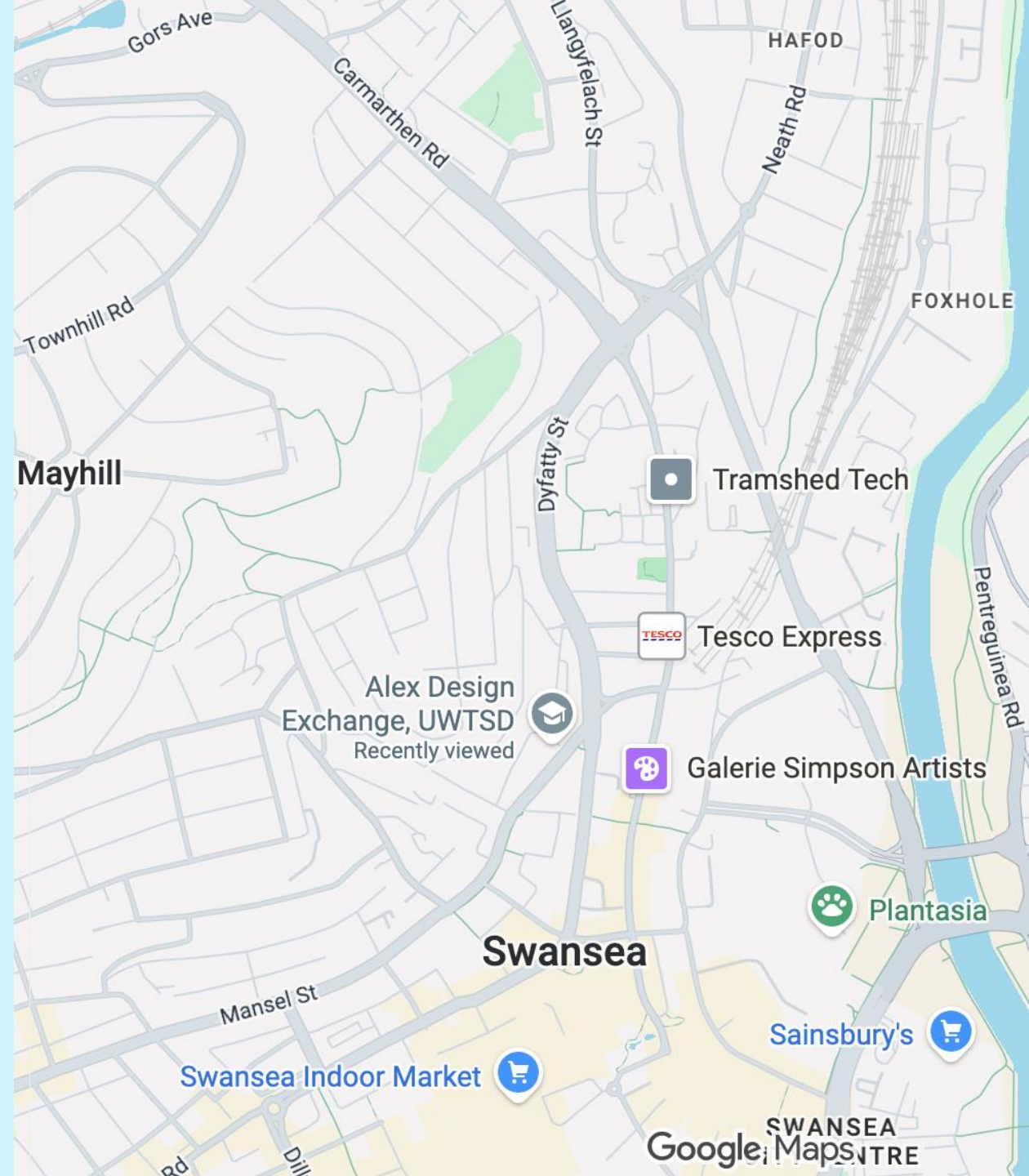
Composition Planning

- Determine focal point
- Balance density versus negative space
- Plan legend placement (if necessary)

A practical guide on how to make a map

To get started you should have by now considered numerous conceptual ideas and chosen one to progress. If not, you should do this next.

Then to put that idea into context, you could start by taking a grab from Google Maps/Google Earth (or any other map) as a starting point.



1: Define the purpose

This map is for navigation and to communicate a concept.

Ask yourself:

- Who is the audience?
- What should the viewer understand first?

Write a one-sentence goal which in this case is:

“This map shows the Creative Quarter of Swansea.”

2: Choose your type of map

Decide what kind of map you're making:

- Observational (real place) ✓
- Pictorial (decorative & illustrative) ✓
- Thematic (data-driven)
- Emotional/personal
- Real. Fictional. Fantasy.
- This decision will affect scale, detail and style.

3: Gather reference

Even stylised maps need structure.

- Do a recce
- Look at satellite views or existing maps
- Collect photos of landmarks
- Note proportions and key routes
- Identify major shapes (rivers, coastlines, roads)
- Focus on big shapes first, not details.

4: Establish the structure

Sketch:

- Outer boundary (coastline, neighbourhood edge, etc.)
- Main roads or pathways
- Major landmarks
- Natural features

4: Establish the structure

Think and work in layers:

1 Land

2 Water

3 Routes

4 Buildings

5 Labels

Keep it simple at this stage.

Step 5: Decide on scale and hierarchy

Ask:

- What are the most important features?
- What should be largest?
- What can be simplified?

Use:

- Line weight
- Size variation
- Colour contrast
- Negative space

Remember, if everything is detailed, nothing will stand out.

6: Create a visual language

Design a consistent system for:

- Buildings
- Trees
- Roads
- Symbols
- Icons

Ask:

- Are they flat or dimensional?
- Textured or clean?
- Playful or minimal?

Consistency is more important than realism.

7: Add typography

Include:

- Title
- Labels
- Legend/key
- Orientation marker (north arrow or alternative)

Tips:

- Make sure text is readable at final size
- Vary type size for hierarchy
- Integrate type into composition

8: Refine the composition

Zoom out and check:

- Is it balanced?
- Is one area overcrowded?
- Is there enough breathing space?
- Does your eye move around the page?
- Remove unnecessary elements.

Clarity is more important than decoration.

9: Test it

Ask someone:

- What do you notice first?
- Can you understand it without explanation?
- What feels confusing?

If they hesitate, simplify.

This is the stage we need to get to for the client presentation of rough visuals.

Requirement for two weeks time.

Rough visual presentations (5 mins max).

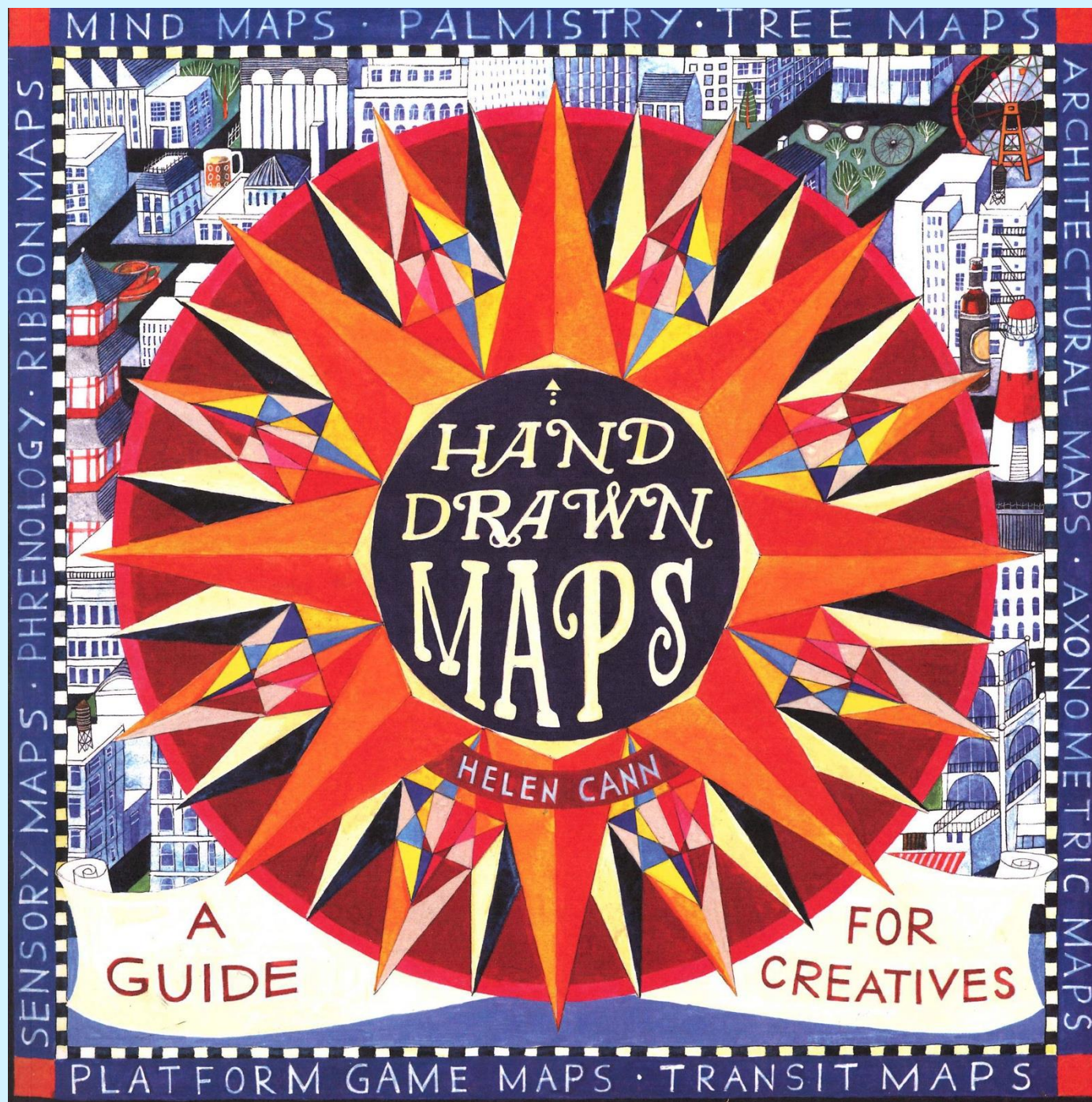
Create a rough visual to share with the client on who will be coming to our studio on Tuesday 24th March from 10am onwards.

For your presentation you may want to follow this simple structure. You can present it in any way you wish (PowerPoint, printouts, film):

- 1. Explain your conceptual idea**
- 2. Share any other relevant examples**
- 3. Explain why you think it works**
- 4. Explain your next steps.**

(Make a note of any advice given by the client)

**Some examples
for inspiration**



MIND MAPS · PALMISTRY · TREE MAPS

ARCHITECTURAL MAPS · AXONOMETRIC MAPS

SENSORY MAPS · PHRENOLOGY · RIBBON MAPS

PLATFORM GAME MAPS · TRANSIT MAPS

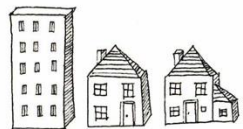
HAND DRAWN MAPS

HELEN CANN

A
GUIDE

FOR
CREATIVES

MAP OF WHITE CLIFFS & ST BARNABAS KEY TO SYMBOLS



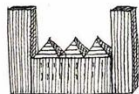
Houses & Apartments



Campsites



Castles & Stately Homes



Factories



Places of Worship



Windmills & Turbines



Lighthouses & Lightships



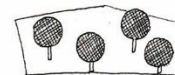
Managed Forest



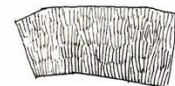
Non-Deciduous Forest



Deciduous Forest



Orchards



Fields



Scrub



Downland



Marshland



Motorway



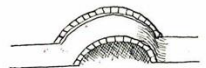
Road



Track



Footpath



Bridge



Cycle Route



Bridle Path



Viewpoint



Parking



Site of Historic Interest



Station



Railway



Tunnel



Water



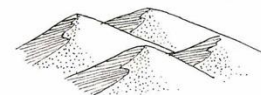
Cliffs



Sandy Beach



Stony Beach



Sand Dunes



Rocks



Airport



Harbour

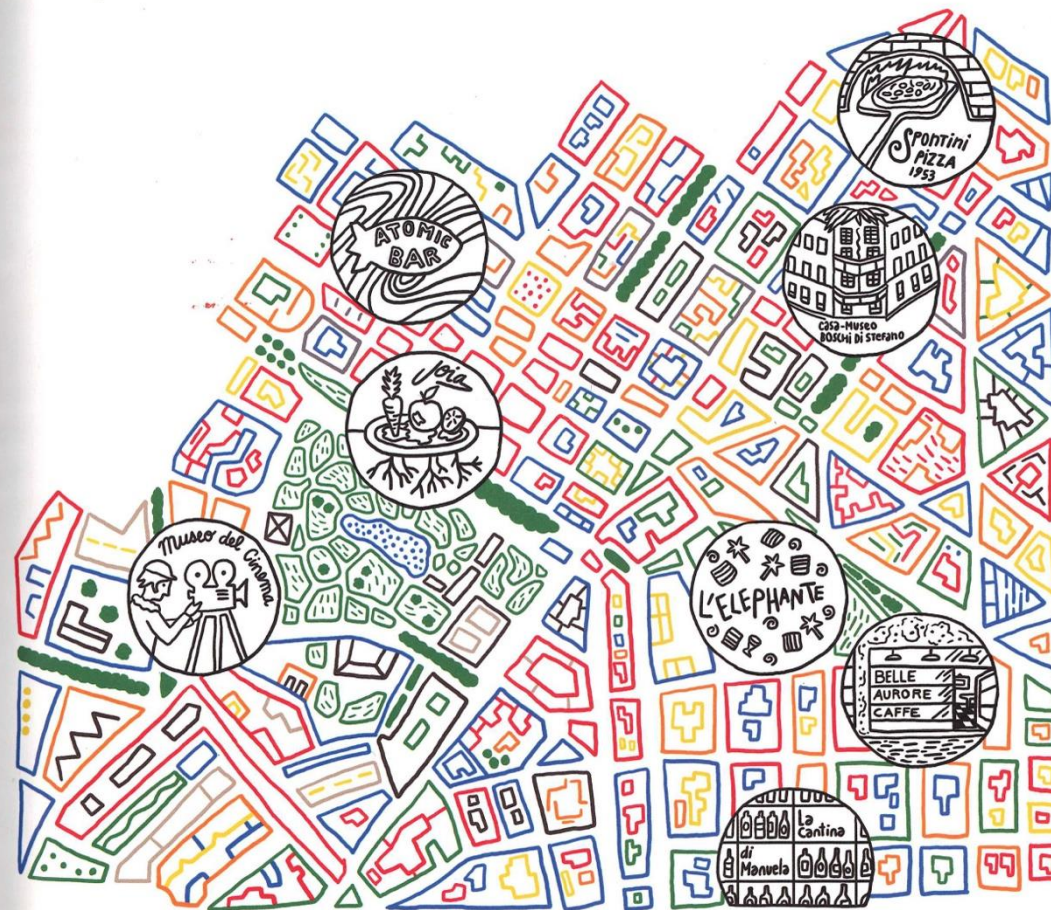
Scale Approx. 1 kilometre = 2 cms.











Milan, Porta Venezia

Antoine Corbineau

