

*** New Plate Special

Unless you live in one of three

states (Maryland, Rhode Island, or Michigan) you are forced to put an ugly tag

on your car. It does not have to be this way, people. As a **GQ public service**,

we commissioned nine of the country's most talented graphic designers and asked them to imagine how great the **American license plate** could be * * * * *



Minnesota by Duffy & Partners

Joe Duffy is the chairman of Duffy & Partners, a Minneapolis design firm specializing in brand- and corporate-identity development. The designer for this project, Brad Surcey, joined Duffy & Partners in July 2004.

*** Minnesota is a state with a strong conservationist attitude; that's why we see the tag being made from a postconsumer recycled material that tends to be dark in color. (This will also help mask the grime of Minnesota's winter road sludge.)

The new shape reduces the amount of material needed while keeping the

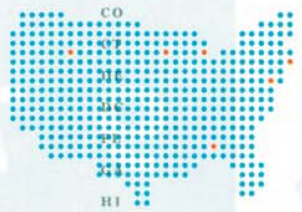
same footprint for the bolts. The information has been streamlined to maximize readability. The large space between the letters and numbers was removed, and a slight color shift was added to more easily distinguish numbers from letters at a glance.

Stratum, the typeface on the plate, was chosen because it's easier to read from a distance (and, as a bonus,

was designed right here in St. Paul).

The renewal stickers were designed with slightly different shapes so that users can easily see which tray to place them in. Blue and green were chosen for their associations to water, which is considered one of Minnesota's greatest natural resources.

AL
AK
AZ
AR
CA
CO
HI
ID
IL



Moving Violations by Fred Woodward

★ ★ ★ Back during the '60s, when he was president, Lyndon Johnson put his wife, Lady Bird (the only first lady to actually be named Lady), in charge of beautifying the American highway. If all she had done was keep Lyndon off the road, she would have made a significant contribution.

Forty years have passed, but the trash isn't just on the side of the road anymore; now it's bolted to the bumpers of millions of cars and trucks barreling down those same highways. Think about it: You spend big money on your dream car, and then the government makes you deface it with an ugly piece of metal. It's not right.

Yes, the car tag is a blight on the American landscape. But it wasn't always. Not that long ago, license plates were clear, no-nonsense items stamped out by those doing their hard time in the states' prisons. The inmates had one typeface, the state's name, sometimes the state's slogan, and a combination of not more than two colors to work with. That's all. It was a beautiful thing in the sheer simplicity of the system, and in the strength of the design that came from those limitations.

The old tags projected confidence and just the right touch of pride. They didn't try too hard. "Oklahoma Is OK." "Famous Potatoes." "Heart of Dixie." "Vacationland." Charming.

So what happened?

Does a single car tag (no matter how great the state) really need a bad illustration, a state-shaped silhouette, a color gradation, two slogans, *and* a dot-com address? When plates are packed with this much ugly, it's no wonder a new car depreciates by 10 percent the second you slap 'em on and drive her off the lot.

It would be easy to blame all the bad new plates on graphic design, my chosen profession. Our research, however, doesn't bear this out. In fact, it seems that very few bona fide, card-carrying graphic designers are responsible for the new plates. The rampant local-chamber-of-commerce-like boosterism displayed on the vast majority of today's plates is more the work of a political committee than an individual designer.

Out of fifty states, only a handful have nonoffensive plates (see below). The rest of you, however, are driving moving violations. Why put up with it? I say we take back the tag, with a real honest-to-God grassroots campaign. Call your governor. Write your congressperson. E-mail your senator. Ask—no, *demand*—that they fix this mess and end the tyranny of the butt-ugly license plate. We don't all have to turn into Howard "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take this anymore" Beale—just tell them to hire a great graphic designer. That's what we did. That's all it would take. The designer might be a sixth-generation citizen of your great state or an immigrant, a transplant, or a native son or daughter who moved away from home. All that really matters is that they're good at their craft and love your state. And this country.



THE GOOD, THE PROUD, THE FEW ★ ★ ★ The Best of What's Out There



BEST MODERN Rhode Island
★ Designed in 1990 by favorite son Tyler Smith, the "Ocean State" plate is a case study in how to do it—done after Smith called the head of the DMV and suggested they make a change.



HOLDOUT AWARD Michigan
★ Showing Teflon-like resistance to all modern trends, Michigan still sports a "prison plate" look that has remained virtually unchanged for the past 21 years (and, hopefully, counting).



ROOTS REVIVAL Maryland
★ The handsomest plate on the road was initially designed to celebrate the state's 350th anniversary. It was wisely put back into permanent rotation in 1987.



BEST REISSUE Alaska
★ This great retro-look plate was brought back this year.



WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PLATES Wyoming
★ CIRCA 1969



WYOMING
★ CIRCA 2002

- ALL-TIME BEST SLOGANS**
- ★ Oklahoma *Oklahoma Is OK*
 - ★ New Hampshire *Live Free or Die*
 - ★ Montana *Big Sky Country*
 - ★ Idaho *Famous Potatoes*
 - ★ Maine *Vacationland*
 - ★ Missouri *Show-Me State*
 - ★ Alabama *Heart of Dixie*

BOTTOM: DAVID NICHOLSON COLLECTION (6)

IN
IA
KS
KY
LA
ME
MO
MT
NE
NV
NH



New Plate Special Unless you live in one of three



Pennsylvania by Chip Kidd

Born and raised in Pennsylvania, Chip Kidd is a writer and book designer living in New York City.

*** License plates have to do two things: (1) Tell me where you're from, so I can swear at you more geographically after you cut me off. (2) Give me your ID number clearly, so I can have you arrested as soon as possible. I don't need or want to know more than that. Furthermore, your license plate is not a means of self-expression, for either you or your state. Your "Honk If You Love Honking!" bumper sticker is more than enough, thanks. So I kept things simple. The colors are back to the good old deep clay blue and golden-wheat yellow of the classic Pennsylvania plates. It's been proven that numbers are easier to memorize in a group than in a line, so I've rearranged them for that purpose. The typeface is, of course, Interstate, which is based on lettering used on highway signage.



New York by Paula Scher

Paula Scher is a partner in the New York office of Pentagram, a design-consultancy firm.

1. Driver Identification
I want to create a national plate. This zone would be your code that you'd have for life, even if you moved to another state. **Materials** | Photoluminescent base plate | High-density rubber frame | Raised and painted lettering

2. Personalized Addition
This becomes the only messaging zone allowed on a car in the United States. The message can be changed often. Changing the message would be encouraged, as it would become a source of revenue for road, bridge, and tunnel improvement. The Department of Transportation would receive a cut of all messaging, even for the political campaign of either party. **Materials** | Photoluminescent acrylic base available in various colors | High-density rubber frame | Raised and painted lettering

3. State Identification
This zone identifies the state to which the car belongs. **Materials** | Screen of lenticular reflectors (looked at from one direction, the state's abbreviation is seen; from the other direction, the state's symbol) | High-density rubber frame

4. Base Plate
This piece is designed to hold all the elements. The pieces may be added or removed, but the base plate remains a permanent fixture of the vehicle. **Materials** | Photoluminescent base plate | High-density rubber frame



Oregon
by John C. Jay

John C. Jay is a creative director and partner at the advertising agency Wieden + Kennedy in Portland.



*** The design on the current Oregon license plate was chosen from a competition open to the public and features the Douglas fir, our official state tree. My design is inspired by the changing times in modern Oregon. It is a place that has attracted and nurtured the dreamer in all of us. In fact, "We Love Dreamers" is the official slogan for the state's tourism campaign. So the luscious green creates depth, a ground, a sky, a mountain, a tree to float on, even a road into the horizon of the future.



North Carolina
by Alexander Isley

Alexander Isley is a North Carolina native and heads Alexander Isley Inc., a Connecticut-based design-consultancy firm.

*** North Carolina's current license plate has "First in Flight" printed across the top. Out of over 350 years of recorded history in a state that has mountains, a seashore, four distinct seasons, a rich cultural history, a region with the most Ph.D.'s per capita in the country, and the world's best barbecue (pulled pork, vinegar-based sauce, thank you very much), all they could come up with is the fact that two brothers from Ohio decided there was a good breeze so that's where they'd fly their plane? That's really it? If North Carolina gets to take credit for being the first to fly, then I guess everyone from Florida was first on the moon.

I know as a professional graphic designer, I'm supposed to come up with something that is "edgy." Thing is, I like things simple. The best designs do their job and don't get in the way. So what you see here is kind of a step back, with slightly nicer type. The color is mostly green, which is the color I remember from my childhood. This is something I'd be happy to have on my car.

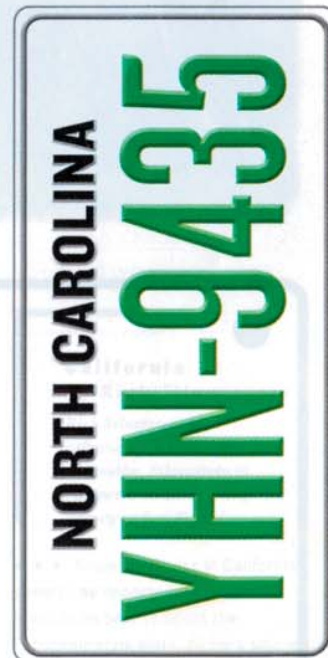


Illinois
by Carlos Segura

Carlos Segura is the president of the design firm Segura Inc. and the founder of [T-26] Digital Type Foundry, both based in Chicago.



*** License plates do quite a bit toward detracting from the lines and design cues of the cars they are put on. In some cases, the designs on the plates are so overwhelming that the readability of the numbers themselves is jeopardized. I am a fan of simplicity and clarity and, in this case, of taking it a step farther by suggesting color-matched plates. So in essence, the background color is the same color as your car, with either black or white numbers, depending on contrast issues.



*** **Take back the tag!** If you like what you see here, do something about it. Go to www.gq.com, where you will find a form letter to e-mail to your governor, congressperson, and state representative, petitioning them to adopt new, cooler license plates like these. Do it today.



TOP: DAVID NICHOLSON COLLECTION



Texas
by DJ Stout

DJ Stout, a sixth-generation Texan, has worked as an art director at Texas Monthly and is a partner at Pentagram in Austin.

*** The current Texas license plate does what all bad designs do: It tries to say everything, so it ends up saying nothing. There is a rendering of a Texas landscape complete with mesas, yucca plants, and tumbleweed; a cowboy on horseback; oil derricks; and the space shuttle, the moon, and stars. It also includes the iconic shape of Texas, its nickname, "The Lone Star State," and the word "Texas" spelled out—just in case some Yankee doesn't get that this is a Texas license plate. We are nothing if not subtle.

My favorite Texas license plates of the past are the black-and-white ones from the '60s. These were simple designs stamped out by the population of Huntsville prison. Our idea is to bring back the simplicity of those tags and to take it a step farther by using the U.S. Postal Service's two-letter abbreviation for Texas. Every person who has ever sent or received a letter recognizes the postal abbreviation TX, and you don't need to add a picture of a cowboy to get the point across.

If this concept was put into use by the rest of the country as well, it would lead to clearer vehicle identification and ultimately a more beautiful American car culture. Thanks to Texas.



**New Jersey
by Louise Fili**

Louise Fili is president of Louise Fili Ltd., a New York City design firm specializing in restaurant identities and food packaging.

*** I grew up in New Jersey at a time when it hadn't become a punch line. Somewhere along the way, my elementary school turned into a shopping mall, our garden was paved over, and the license plates went from bad to worse. And did I mention that my ancestral home was wrecked by Satan worshippers? In the early '70s, having endured enough, I crossed the Hudson to Manhattan, where I have lived ever since. My proposed design celebrates a simpler, happier time for all things animal, vegetable, and mineral.



LICENSE TO ILL *** The Worst of What's Out There



A.D.D. AWARD
Indiana
★ The design and slogan have been changed more times than the tires at the Indy 500—14 out of the past 20 years.



WORST SLOGAN
Alabama
Stars Fell on Alabama
★ If you're going to use a song lyric as your slogan, can it at least be by Skynyrd?



BALLSIEST SLOGAN
District of Columbia
Taxation Without Representation
★ With this eyesore, residents with no vote on Capitol Hill stick it to The Man—with no effect.



MOST OVERRIPE
Florida
★ There's still a little room in the other three corners for Mickey, Minnie, and Goofy.



WORST TYPOGRAPHY
Mississippi
★ Lettering so bad it makes you want to look away (*look away, look away!*), Dixieland.



MOST JUVENILE
Hawaii
★ Every 8-year-old girl's favorite.



WORST OF ALL TIME
Kentucky
★ Looks like somebody in Kentucky has been smoking the bluegrass.

CENTER: DAVID NICHOLSON COLLECTION (7)

4N1A

**California
by Rich Silverstein**

Rich Silverstein is a cofounder and cochairman of Goodby, Silverstein & Partners, an advertising agency in San Francisco.

*** Since most cars in California seem to be imported, I thought it would be best to adopt the European-style plate. All cars sold in the state would be required to have bumpers that fit this shape. Because California is really its own republic, I don't see any problem with us having our own rules.