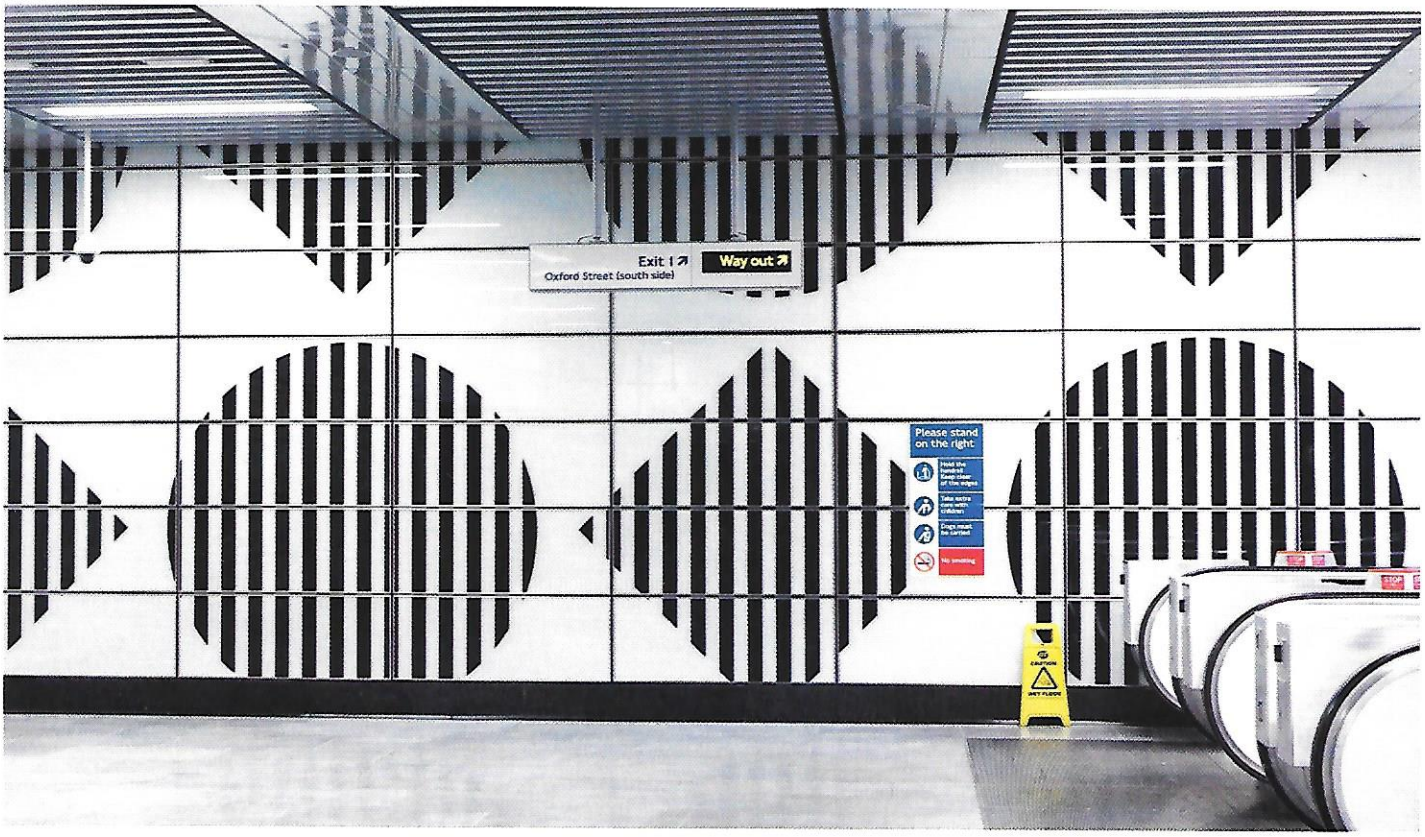

ABOVE, THE ENTRANCE AT OXFORD STREET UTILISES A MONOCHROME PALETTE

lozenges,' says Harbinder Birdi, a partner at Hawkins\ Brown, the principal architects for the station upgrade (in collaboration with Acanthus Architects LW).

As Birdi explains, the black and white wall is actually a mirror image of the coloured one, and the overall feeling should be of a continuous artwork, disrupted here and there by the infrastructure. 'There are various layers of discovery,' he says. 'We hope that when people use the station time and time again, they will start picking up on the different ways the artwork manifests in the station.'

Commuters have grown used to seeing first-rate art at Tottenham Court Road station, where the passageways and platform walls are covered with mosaics created in 1984 by Eduardo Paolozzi, and where there are plans for future works by Douglas Gordon and Richard Wright. Indeed, the London Tube as a whole has an impressive history of art and design going back to Frank Pick, the visionary administrator who commissioned works including the typeface, symbol and map a century ago. In recent years, several artists have reimagined the map, including Buren, who layered the iconic blue and red roundel to make something he compares to a Scottish tartan.

Buren's Tottenham Court Road installation is a permanent part of the 'Art on the Underground' programme, which Transport For London established in 2000 (under a different name) to commission new artworks, most of them temporary. The programme's head, Eleanor Pinfield, says, 'I want to build on our reputation for innovative commissions. We have a unique audience – all of London. We have the power to bring art to that group. I feel strongly we have to be on the cutting edge, providing for that wide audience.'

The committee chose Buren in 2008, before Pinfield arrived. Referring to the original sketches – which are surprisingly faithful to the final result – Pinfield says the jury had been struck by the proposition's boldness and ambition, as well as Buren's understanding of the environment and how to highlight its strengths. 'His work plays so wonderfully to create a sense of location at those two entrances while having continuity.' Friends can agree to meet at the coloured entrance or the black and white one, with zero chance of confusion.

No stranger to architecture, Buren's creations are all intimately connected to their locations. He never works in an atelier (he doesn't even have one), but chooses to do everything in situ, creating pieces that interact with a particular building or place. Stripes are his trademark visual tool, his way of defining and manipulating a space. They are always vertical and always presented in two contrasting colours precisely 8.7cm apart. He started using this width in 1965, after coming across a piece of striped upholstery fabric at a Paris market. He says the size and motif are neutral and legible on surfaces both small and large, and sketches an example in a reporter's notebook as proof.

His best-known work is 'Les Deux Plateaux', in the inner courtyard of the Palais-Royal in Paris. Made of black and white striped and variously truncated columns, this intrusion of contemporary art in a historical site created a furore when it went up in the mid-1980s. Buren recalls that people tried to destroy it while construction was still underway, and that he and the architect paid a security guard out of their own pockets to protect it.

Now it's an integral part of the Parisian landscape. Kids play on it, tourists take photos. The thing about permanent, public artwork, he notes, is that you can't set out to please everybody. An artist can dream that he's making a masterpiece, but it's unpredictable how people will view it. 'The biggest danger is that people will stop seeing it, as though there was nothing there at all.' It's hard to imagine this happening at Tottenham Court Road station, where hordes of people will engage with Buren's creation simply by walking past it. ✱