

THE BOOTS D90 EAST PROJECT

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The Boots Company plc is a major employer in Nottingham with office sites scattered around the city. Its network of shops around the country makes it the largest point of sale network in the country. By the early 1990s its growth was such that it had to expand its headquarters in Beeston. Drawing inspiration from Mies van der Rohe's National Gallery in Berlin, the architects Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, had designed the first Beeston headquarters. Not surprisingly, as a Grade II* listed building, there were significant limitations to what could be achieved with the existing structure. Boots took the plunge and decided to create an entirely new building that would complement the existing structure. At the same time it decided to create a major change in the company's management ethos. The new building, D90 East, was intended to give physical embodiment to that new ethos at the same time as promoting its "Look Good, Feel Good" philosophy and company profile.

Boots' own booklet *Welcome to your new Head Office* explained to its employees:

The new building and its exciting new look environment is designed to support a real, step change in the speed and quality of service that head office provides to stores and customers. At the heart of that step change are new ways of working which will enable us to work smarter in this evolving age of technology where speed of response is vital to maintain competitive advantage.

New ways of working brings:

- a leading-edge building, designed to motivate us and keep Boots as a first choice employer
- a new working environment that is substantially better than our present office accommodation and as good as other world class companies
- a futuristic and open plan, neighbourhood approach which maximises opportunity for creative team working
- opportunities to re-design the way we work and encourage an environment which is demanding and innovative, whilst being supportive and rewarding
- a direct link to our Look Good Feel Good strategy by bringing together all Head Office functions and unleashing our combined potential
- a major update of technology, both hardware and software, to ensure top quality communication information management and personal effectiveness.
- When complete, in Autumn 1999, there will be upwards of 2,500 of us working together in the new D90 complex – our new environment needs to support staff and several hundred visitors together, in as harmonious a way as possible.

Like many other companies about to open a new building Boots decided that it would have an exhibition of art to match its new image. It contacted the Faculty of Art and Design at Nottingham Trent University and then convened a meeting of its own project planning staff and their consultants with representatives from Nottingham and Nottingham Trent Universities. The initial plan was ambitious. There would be two phases: the first of selected work from artists at NTU and the second of work commissioned specifically for the site. There would be an education programme in which artists would be brought in on a regular basis to talk about their work to Boots employees. There would be a study of the impact of the exhibition on Boots' employees.

And there would be an exhibition catalogue to promote the work externally. There would also be an option to consider the use of spatial research to evaluate the new ways of working; this would involve the architecture department of Nottingham University. The meeting agreed an Arts Policy that would have the following objectives:

- Promote the Look Good, Feel Good strategy.
- Generate positive publicity.
- Transform the 'dependable but dull' image to a new creative and imaginative world class profile.
- Promote relationships between BTC, Nottingham Universities, students and local artists.
- Appeal to the "Nintendo" generation.
- Develop links between stakeholders (D90 East and West and the local community).
- Move away from conventional artwork to promote new ways of working and a dynamic company image.
- Work in partnership with staff to provide feeling of ownership.
- Educate staff about artwork to promote interest in the building.
- Obtain feedback on effectiveness of space planning.

Unfortunately disaster struck by way of a decline in Boots' yearly profit. The ambitious plan had to be scaled down and the result was a freestanding installation in the D90 East building with backup in the form of an intranet site to promote the work internally amongst Boots' staff and take feedback to project managers.

To the professional eye the resulting exhibition was competently hung and included an engaging range of work ranging from the abstract paintings by Simon Lewis and Derek Sprawson, through the figurative painting by Duncan Higgins, photography by Cary Welling, Rhonda Wilson, Max Kandhola, Nev Smith, Roger Beecroft, Paul Hough and Ian Yexley. There were installations by Alain Ayers, Duncan Mountford, Andy Bannister and Joanne Lee. And there were *objets* by Anne Lydiat and Craig Staff. A pleasant couple of hours could be spent wandering around the building taking in the work. And therein lies the difference between the way in which an interested visitor could experience the work and the way it was experienced by the employees of Boots. Regardless of what might have been thought by organisers and artists, the Boots' employees did not feel any obligation to wander around the building and look at what was on show any more than they would wander round the building and admire the way that it was constructed.

The D90 East building is quite a remarkable construction. From the outside it looks like a high-tech box. From the inside, in the centre, it looks quite cavernous. With massively impressive acoustics it offers a highly successful solution to the problem of creating multiple communities within an open plan environment. As such, it stands in direct contrast to the earlier building that Martin Spring described in the following terms:

Externally, it is a huge and imposing single-storey pavilion in glass and steel that seems to float effortlessly over the grass. Internally, the building opens out into sweeping, uncluttered spaces that stretch from one end to the other. All is clarity and serenity, ...

There is also an eerie lack of people visible in the building, even during busy working hours. This is because staff are all tucked away behind shoulder-height oak screens in small individual carrels.

The staff, however, do not drool over the building. They disparagingly dub their carrels "pig pens", as they cut them off both from their colleagues and the building's

generous internal space and external views.

However much the new building is an improvement on its predecessor, which is undoubtedly true, I would be surprised to find the Boots' staff drooling over their new environment either. Impressed, perhaps, but not drooling. 'Architecture' represents a different category from 'building' and however much architects might speak in the demotic about their 'buildings' they are actually talking about what they perceive to be architecture.

The reason for invoking the two categories of architecture and building is that on talking to the Boots' staff they contrasted the experience of walking into an art gallery with walking into their HQ. The former was something that they might do as a matter of choice, the latter was something they had to do to earn a living. There was a general feeling of imposition, that something was being inflicted on them by their environment. The majority of female staff I interviewed said that if they were given a choice they would prefer the kinds of art that they would put on their walls at home, preferably landscapes. And if the budget ran to it they would be inclined to have a Monet. But then, they surmised, if they were given that choice they would have to allow the men a choice as well, which would probably result in pictures of trains, planes and nudes cluttering the walls. The choice they were offered, however, was not the individual images that had been situated in the environment but a choice of interpretation. The exhibition had been commissioned to explicitly support Boots' 'Look Good, Feel Good' strategy.

One set of paintings, *Male Body* by Duncan Higgins, was taken down precisely because staff complained that the paintings made them feel bad. Descriptions covered a range from 'depressing' to 'un-nerving' to 'horrible'. *Traintrack and Billsthorpe Colliery* was left hanging and attracted mixed responses from a positive 'I really enjoy imagining what that is' to a negative 'What do we want pictures of a colliery for?' Given the fact that many of their colleagues had been made redundant it is not altogether surprising that images of a grindingly depressing and depressed industry should attract negative vibes. The intranet site¹ responded differently (Duncan Higgins):

Perhaps it is that both of these canvases represent journeys into the unknown. Journeys of exploration, intrigue and excitement. Moving forwards in a diligent but positive manner.

BTC is on a journey in strengthening its world class position in the market. Long journeys like ours are open to the rough and the smooth, the unexpected, a number of difficulties may be encountered but there is reward for our commitment, belief and motivation to fulfill our objectives through sound processes, strategies and structures.

One obvious difference between the two is that the railway track is above ground and follows only one route to its final destination. On its way it will stop at a number of designated stations. Given that it is open to the everyday elements and human hazards anything could happen.

In contrast, the cave is underground where artificial light is required and there is an intricate network of tunnels to be explored. If the right tunnel is not chosen does it imply that time and resources have been wasted or does it perhaps imply that we won't make the same mistake

¹ <http://davinci.ntu.ac.uk/rws/researchers/visualarts/boots/index.htm>

twice? Here we are given a choice, perhaps to come to the right decision we need to call upon the inspiration, innovation, advice and expertise of others, to place trust in their judgement and integrity and to stretch our vision.

Each one of us are on a journey of personal development taking ownership and responsibility of our role and what impact it has on others and the organisation as a whole. Of the two journeys shown which one would you and your neighbourhood choose to challenge you and why?

By contrast, representational painting invites thoughts about the subject. Abstract painting poses problems of a different order. To the naïve spectator, abstract painting is simply meaningless. Response becomes a matter of personal taste until, in this case, it was located within some kind of interpretational framework. (Derek Sprawson):

The mixture of wax with oil paint gives the surface a softness and density that heightens the appeal to the senses, producing the effect of a faint luminous sheen, rather like the bloom on certain fruits. At the same time, making the work so physically sensitive, its surface susceptible to marking and damage, helps to bring out the aspect of vulnerability, tenderness and exposure implied in the paintings' forms and images.

Each painting presents a single shape outlined on a ground of a contrasting colour, producing a curiously haunting and elusive effect. The shapes which dominate each painting are willfully suspended between familiarity and enigma.

It wasn't altogether ironical that these particular paintings became quite noticeably damaged during their period of installation because they almost seemed to invite violation. The only work that did seem to meet with some interest, and possible enthusiasm, was Cary Welling's *Lips* and Paul Hough's images from his childhood. There was an irony to the appreciation of *Lips* in that the model was not a live human being but a plastic doll: the humanity of the appearance was a product of a marketed commodity. The website ran the following commentary (Cary Welling):

Caroline Welling made these lips in the hope that you, their audience, would find them mysterious and full of passion. Caroline has lived with the prints for a while and found that although they were strangers who became familiar they have never bored her. She hopes that you enjoy them as much as she did.

The 3 large pictures of lips are representation of the most common form of communication - the spoken word. The new building has enabled faster, clearer communications. An increase in morale has been noted. People are able to communicate with greater ease and generally find people more approachable. Morale has noticeably increased. Through verbal communication we promote NWOW and LGFG. [**New Ways of Working** and **Look Good Feel Good**]

There was one significant way in which the installation worked in its totality and that was by creating a set of reference markers around the building. Employees were more easily able to arrange meetings by reference to the local art works. In this way they helped to create a mental map of the new environment. When the installation was taken down and replaced by Boots posters, advertising **Look Good Feel Good** products, the environment reverted to a state of anonymity.

The promised debate over ownership, both of **New Ways of Working** and of the building, never emerged. The installation was a tokenistic gesture that failed to work. One symptom of its likely failure was the fact that one of the Boots' senior managers decided that he was not going to have any new-fangled work on his wall and insisted on

retaining a rather bad landscape painting. Old habits die hard: Boots has a new building but its old managerial strategy is still intact.