



What was the brief? Some people referred to the brief as a poem, you know: we want the building to be eternally flexible, we want people to feel natural light and we want people to work together and understand what each other are doing. They sort of tried to get the atmosphere of the company and I thought that was very important – they wanted us to understand what they were doing. We got into quite a discussion about the philosophy of industrial work and to what extent people working in a factory should be looked upon, or the other way around, in terms of what they were trying to achieve.

You were very taken with the flexibility side of the brief, weren't you? Yes, there was some question about who was pushing it – Herman Miller or us. But the general atmosphere was one of trying to make it a pretty democratic and interchangeable kind of atmosphere. It was quite new, that the whole company should be democratic.

You were also very interested in the Action Office idea, weren't you? Yes, it started off with the whole idea that somehow they could all join in. In a way they set the whole thing up, in the way they worked together. It was a kind of complete philosophy really. The idea that if you had to, if

you wanted to, you could shuffle your entire workplace over a weekend and be back working in it on Monday.

When we first started with Herman Miller, I was quite keen on developing a brand called Action Factory where they made the components and then they reversed roles and made the parts in the first place from a drawing, and then manufactured pieces, and then they made the system so they could sort of develop the system as we were building it which was quite an interesting concept. We certainly saw several of the components actually developed while we were putting the building up.

How did you go about creating this building and the ideas of flexibility – what was your design process?

There was a lot of trial and error in the whole process and we gradually uncovered the sort of person that in a way wanted that, and the collective way of working there. That really was quite an important thing for Herman Miller, they sort of live by their own philosophy and ate together and talked about what they were doing.

We thought that the first thing is you've got to have flexibility to develop it as you go, to some degree. We had a lot of prototyping and people would knock up a bit of an arm of a thing overnight and then say, oh yeah, that's much better.



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13 The building very deliberately made the most of its riverfront situation specifically for the staff

14 & 15 Lightness and the mouldable qualities of GRP were key factors in its use and stemmed from Nicholas Grimshaw's love of sailing

Guidance from management pushed you in one way and you soon gathered from them what they didn't like and what they did like. It is sort of learning, which people seemed to do quite quickly, what didn't work and what did work.

The first thing was to make it as flexible as you possibly can, so you can divide it up into areas where people were specially doing something, or it can be swept away overnight. All the servicing was from the top down; they kept what was going on on the floor and the prototyping and all that kind of thing completely separate from the servicing, which was coming from the eave, from above.

If you wanted to carry the flexibility idea through, you had to make everything fit and match and the joints system; once you'd got that, joining panels together at 60 degrees or whatever, you can't suddenly change. The grid was, I suppose, the first thing you started off with. We spent quite a lot of time on the geometry of the joints and the things fitting together.

The hinge was absolutely critical and the more vertical joints you've got, the closer the panels got in slices and so you then had to set limits. You can divide a piece of cheese into 16 but you can't go much further than that and they started off with a point of a three-way joint and then it sort of developed from there.

How did you decide on the materials? You used a lot of glass panels on the river facade. Well the environment was very important and being able to see out over the river, which was very impressive – everyone loved that. You could see colour from a daylight point of view and that was thought to be very, very important. It was a time of strong primary colours – bright yellow, orange and red and brown fabric seating – which everyone thought was completely mad for the time, but it worked.

How did you decide on fibreglass and what was it like using it? Well I knew it for boats, but it turned out to be slightly different using it outside and using it inside. It's a very mouldable material and we probably had more experience than anybody else doing that, right back from the old days when we were casting bathrooms complete for the students' hostel in west London [the Student Hostel Service Tower, 1967] and they were just craned into position.

It was only the beginnings of people thinking you could actually replace steel with a lighter material. One of the things that led us towards fibreglass was because it's a directable material – you make casts, you develop the shapes and you can change them again too if it doesn't work properly from a planning point of view. This idea of planning and circulation was absolutely critical, because you could affect the whole layout of a scheme and you could lose



With the next building for Herman Miller you decided not to use fibreglass — why not? There's a certain worry about the permanence of fibreglass, you know it's a sort of plastic, it's throwaway. As a system, Herman Miller was also starting to take notice of waste and dealing with how long you could keep a material going for. Then you had to go back from that to the fact that you were making a lot of waste products and the whole sustainability side of life – just because you're trying to be sustainable, doesn't mean you are.

The decision to move from fibreglass to aluminium for the next building was entirely to do with perceived longevity and it's something which has changed enormously – and of course it changes these days with things like prices of aluminium and ore.

What are you most proud of from the Herman Miller Factory project? I think inevitably, the fact that it worked. That was a certain sort of feeling of achievement because you were dealing with something that actually did go together and fit. The irony is, these things don't happen overnight. It took several years to basically see the fact that actually, it is working, and that joint we thought was going to be absolute hell to engineer has worked and we've got a system that hangs together.

And now the 1976 Herman Miller factory has become Bath Spa University. It's something I'm very proud of, that we made happen. We adapted it and bolted things on to it and gradually allowed it to emerge from being a factory to being a university, which is quite a big change really.

We found just by making some changes in levels of working, just tuning it up, we managed to turn it round from a component factory to a university. How can you change a building into a sort of friendly industrial environment? There's certain things about universities, about trying to integrate subjects together which seem to make it possible.

Probably some people think it's rather a lot of extra work to make it work, but it's an attractive centrepiece that's sort of becoming a bit of a magnet in changing the direction of the university. Everyone seems to be very happy about it at the moment. It's very interesting how psychology plays such a role: they think they accepted the fact that you could turn a factory building into a university as a general view, but then all the things that you had to do to it to make it work meant it got more and more compromised with people saying why are we doing this, why aren't we building it in Bath stone and all the rest of it. It leads you to the fact of sustainability: it's much better to try and make what's there work than to try and reinvent the wheel in a way. ■

16 Nicholas Grimshaw photographed earlier this year by Blueprint after the announcement he had been awarded the 2019 RIBA Royal Gold Medal

16

