

## **Good office design is more than skin deep**

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What do commercial clients want most from their architects? Some useful accommodation, or a bit of magic? Twenty years ago, most developers concentrated on net to gross ratios and yields, and stared at out of the window, at their shoes or at the QS when the architect started going on about the 'concept'. Today, with Nouvel, Viñoly, and now Koolhaas working on large projects in the City of London it is clear that, at least in the Square Mile, the balance between commodity and delight must have shifted. But will the talent now on tap be used to provide better workspace as well as new icons for the city's skyline?

An earlier wave of foreign architects - SOM, Pelli - brought North American know-how and reliability to the City and the Isle of Dogs. This time, it seems likely that it is flair rather than corporate competence that developers are seeking by looking abroad for their architects. But investment in flair sounds risky, and big developers and their backers are generally risk-averse. Commercial property, meanwhile, remains the tradable commodity that it always was. What's going on?

Branding and identity are important as never before. To some architects, the crossover of branding into architecture is upsetting, undermining what they see as the latter's serious purpose. In other constellations of the architectural firmament, however, there is an interesting and serendipitous alignment between the intellectual preoccupations of those who design the buildings and the commercial interests of those who build and market them. Enigmatic images of boxes or blobs with 'beautiful skin' engage the attention of many architects. Office space, meanwhile, has been reduced for the most part to a closely defined,

BCO-sanctioned standard product, which most commercial clients appear to have little interest in challenging. In spite of this, the clients want their buildings to be dressed up to look quite different from all the others. If superficial is the new deep, that seems to suit everyone.

Everyone on the project team, that is. What about the workers? A lot of the standard deep-plan workspace built or proposed in the City of London doesn't look very pleasant to work in. Battery-farm conditions are compensated for by high pay. Few architects, or I suspect developers, would be prepared to work in the space they are building.

According to the mantra, good architecture comes from a good client and a good brief as well as a good architect. But it's more complex than that: being a good client may sometimes mean listening to an architect who is prepared to challenge the brief rather than just go off and deliver what was asked for. So it would be nice to think that figures with the intellect and authority of those named above will speak up for those who will work in their buildings.

The simple things that make workspace pleasant to occupy - generous space, daylight, a view, fresh air - are not easy to provide in the tightly packed centre of the capital. Making buildings that are great to work in as well as good to look at is a challenge - one that the world's top architects ought to be up to. With employers taking more interest in issues of recruitment and retention, and the huge costs attached - and with big corporations laying more attention to sustainability and energy use - perhaps it is a challenge that they should encourage their clients to take more seriously. A brief generated by the letting agents is likely to be based on the last thing that worked - the architect should be thinking about the next thing.

An earlier breed of developer had (with honourable exceptions) little time for architectural aspirations. Now, the iconic

imagery that today's architects can offer is seen as highly desirable. The progeny of current flings, however, will be with us for a while. The period of infatuation ought to be a good time for the signature architects to use what must be formidable powers of persuasion to convince their clients that good design is more than skin deep.