

Transcript for Terry Farrell: MI6 Building, London

Intro to animation

So, what exactly IS this building? It's got ramparts. Stupendously thick walls and even a moat!

Is it Edinburgh Castle?

Don't be daft. It's Sir Terry Farrell's MI6 Building.

Setting the scene

Terry up-sticks from fifties Newcastle, via a stint in Pennsylvania, to 60s London; where he fell out with his practice partner Grimshaw over a matter of style.

Farrell had plugged himself into a cut and paste post-modernist approach, mixing materials into collages, like an architectural Doctor Who.

Eighties London, Thatcher, mobile phones bigger than your chest and Terry's in loads-a-money having won a competition to design an urban village on the banks of the Thames. However, with the Cold War stuck in the deep freeze, the Thatcher government moved the goalposts and declared that what was actually needed was a big, secure castle... for an "environmental government department"... Spooky!

The Big Idea

Farrell assumed that the design should be imposing and an exercise in "State Power". So he drew inspiration from monolithic buildings like Bankside and Battersea State Power stations.

The design fused together disparate elements, in Farrell's trademark style, with concrete and steel forming ancient ramparts topped off with a glass pyramid.

One requirement on the government's wish-list was security. Sir Terry certainly delivered that. The whole edifice says KEEP OUT. From bomb proof walls to anti-bugging triple glazing and even a moat, what was eventually revealed as the new MI6 building is definitively "Fortress Farrell".

Drawings

Looking closely at the design you can see how anyone looking at the building is drawn to the centre. Farrell used some clever tricks in the design configuration like translation, repetition and reflection to create a strong and symmetrical structure.

In some ways it's very formal with layers and layers ordered according to strict rules of pattern.

The solid blocks resulting from these patterns create openings for natural light. The contrast between the 'solids and the voids' is central to the character of the building.

Construction

Making this structure as secure as possible meant that Farrell could raid his post-modern 'mixed media' drawer.

The composite material "concrete" can be moulded or poured into pre-existing spaces. Cement on its own is hard and brittle, but by adding other elements and by changing and layering the mix, it becomes super strong concrete.

Farrell used steel as tendons to support the huge beams and walls, which would make the building practically bomb proof.

Farrell's methods meant, like many modern buildings, sections could be prefabricated off site and assembled like a big heavy jigsaw.

The triple glazed windows are set deep and bullet proofed with a special coating. Subsequently conversations cannot be monitored by radio waves 'reading' the vibrations on the glass.

Secrecy during construction must have been a huge challenge, especially with the number of contractors needed to make a building of this size.

The original design vision was completely turned on its head when the Government re-purposed the building. Even so, two moats were installed including a nice fountain, which might have seemed more at home in the original urban village design!

Critique

It has been widely castigated as very ugly and like 'Lego-land' in contrast to the urban village proposed for the site. However, security was (and still is) the chief purpose of this building. Judging by the way it survived an attack in 2000, the building at least fulfils this purpose.