

Transcript for Norman Foster: Willis Faber and Dumas Headquarters, Ipswich

Intro to animation

Hello. This is the Willis, Faber and Dumas Headquarters in Ipswich, designed by one of the high priests of British Architecture: Sir Norman Foster.

Setting the scene

Say "hello" to the young Norman ... mooching his way through school and Uni in fifties Manchester.

One particular structure catches his eye; reflected in the opaque façade of the Manchester Daily Express Building is the start of an idea.

Fast forward to the beginning of the seventies; it's over for the hippies and Norman's buildings are the new rock and roll.

Big Cities and rigid structures are not hip, "man", and big corporations are decentralising and packing their bags to "head-quarters" out to smaller towns.

One in particular, Willis Faber, were keen to throw their windows wide to a new democratic, egalitarian vista...

... in Ipswich.

The Big Idea

Foster decided to make a sandwich.

That is... A "building sandwich"...

The offices: a delicious filling in the middle ... while communal amenities, like a roof garden, formed the top slice ... and a swimming pool: the bottom.

Hmm... that bread might get a bit soggy.

Openness was king in this building. On the surface to help instil a sense of community;

but more because it makes it cheaper, and easier, to move departments about.

There were no doors... anywhere!

Well all right... a few on the toilets.

Democracy; community; openness: ...

Sounds like a political manifesto. However the desire for this call to arms was commercial.

Drawings

First an architect gets a plot to play with. Here's the one in Ipswich. See if you can make the pieces fit.

The escalators were placed centrally giving the interior an axial symmetry. The offices were arranged radiating outwards.

The irregular pattern of streets and plot shape is one of the reasons and primary generators for the building's curvy facade.

Construction

Foster called the building a pancake in a pan. It was actually four layers, more like a stack of pancakes. Here are the planned sections; place the layers in order.

The swimming pool was eventually used as more office space. Can't imagine the computers worked too well underwater.

Foster's landmark glass walls were more like gigantic transparent curtains, carefully calculated to hang under tension; try hanging them up.

Foster and the glass company Pilkington, thought that suspending the glass in this way would be stronger because glass structures are at their best under tension.

This was innovative. Even during the pre-build the feasibility of hanging glass like this was questioned.

Critique

So, was this model for corporate good-society sustainable? Maybe in the good times, but as darker economic clouds rolled in, out went the pool and the crèche, replaced by more office space. One of the main criticisms of this project was that the social aspect of the building failed in the long term.