

Space as Brand Experience

by Jeremy Myerson



Reebok® world Headquarters.

At Reebok's world headquarters just outside Boston, the facade presents itself like the curved segment of a sports stadium, the entrance is reached via a running track, the central atrium is a basketball court and the overall plan is shaped to suggest the coiled energy of an athlete on the starting blocks.

At Quiksilver's corporate and distribution centre at Newport Beach in southern California, the building expresses the surf and skateboard company's beachfront culture with a polished boardwalk, lifeguard stands and slatted beach shacks where employees work.



Corporate America is investing in a new phenomenon—the office as a brand experience.



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Space as Brand Experience, continued

At Muzak's South Carolina base, which houses the world's largest digitized music library, the interior is laced with circular motifs—from panel perforations to rotundas in space—that evoke the vinyl record and music turntable.

What is going on? The answer is that corporate America is investing in a new phenomenon—the office as a brand experience. Welcome to the world of the 'narrative office' where some of the biggest global brand names have woken up to the potential of their own office environment as a branding tool for employees, visitors, suppliers and investors alike.

Treating your office space not as a neutral asset but as an opportunity to express what your brand really stands for is seen by a growing number of business leaders as making good motivational sense.

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The South Carolina base of Muzak®.

According to Paul Brown, vice president of product design at Reebok, whose company worked with architects NBBJ on a new \$70 million campus, 'What we've achieved here is a perfect synergy of products, innovation and marketing ... This is our church. Everything that comes out of our church represents what we do. When you come into the building you know what you are and who you are.'



Reebok and a clutch of other powerful brand owners are the early adopters of a trend towards new offices that are essentially narrative in form in that they tell a story about company and its brand values through an experience or choreographed journey through interior space.

As branding and reputation are inextricably linked, these narrative offices, argue their designers, create a powerful point of difference for occupiers by bringing brand values alive, by acting a receptacle for corporate 'memory' and by giving people constant visual stimuli in their environment to promote a service ethos. But just how new is the narrative trend and how sustainable is the approach?

Space as Brand Experience, continued

Treating your office space as an opportunity to express what your brand really stands for is seen as making really good motivational sense.

One could argue that the narrative office has powerful precedents in the previous century. IBM® was famous for its signature approach to real estate worldwide. Buildings as diverse as the Chrysler Building in New York, Hoover Building in London and the Fiat factory in Turin set up a strong narrative in the visitor's mind. But as Wallis Gilbert's Art Deco fantasy for Hoover on London's Great West Road showed, the narrative stopped at the building elevation. Behind the facade it was generally business as usual. The storyline was only skindeep.

What is new is the tendency to treat office interiors as raw material for branded storytelling and it is here that one begins to see an attempt to reverse the emphasis on corporate neutrality that dominated late 20th century office design. For too long, so the narrative proponents seem to be saying, offices were designed as anonymous, over-engineered blank boxes that betrayed little of the inner life of the organization.



Toyota's British headquarters.

It is indeed true that from the 1960s onwards, most offices were specified to be blandly neutral, first by risk averse developers and then by corporate tenants who adopted 'vanilla' solutions driven by global standards that dictated everything from the colour of the carpet to the size of an office for a particular grade of worker. We've all worked in places where the lowest common denominator was the most banal and most boringly acceptable design solution to implement.

But in the competitive service-oriented economy of the 21st century, all that is changing. Companies no longer want the place where their employees spend the vast majority of their time to look

and feel exactly like everyone else's office. They want the environment to be uniquely loaded with the company's own brand signifiers, they regard all staff as on the marketing frontline—and the trend is not confined to America.

In Europe, too you'll find expressive examples of corporate brandscapes. Toyota®, for example, has built a narrative British headquarters at Epsom Downs which features an internal street and makes explicit reference to the automotive industry in its curved forms, crisp metallic finishes and spacious interior vistas. Sony® markets its Playstation™ brand from a London office styled to reflect the virtual reality of computer gaming itself.



Space as Brand Experience, continued

In both cases, the brand treatment is confined to vibrant semi-public areas. Private workspace beyond them are relatively conventional. This is not surprising, says Andrew Harrison, director of research at architects DEGW who recently led a European Union-funded study into sustainable accommodation for the new economy (entitled SANE).

Harrison's team built scenarios around three types of work environment: private (protected access), privileged (invited access) and public (open access). "The narrative trend is mostly happening in the privileged space because the brand experience is being meted out in a tightly controlled way," says Harrison.

Not everyone believes the intense use of messaging in space supports greater productivity, as the champions of the narrative office believe. Some even see an insidious new form of Taylorism in the mind control inherent in such tactics.

According to British workplace strategist Ziona Strelitz of Ziona Strelitz Associates, who has carried out many post-occupancy studies, some of the most heavily branded workplaces are also some of the

most oppressive places to work. 'Narrative offices are not always well-received by staff because too many designers go at it from a simplistic graphical point of view which jars,' she says.

The message clearly is that more subtlety is required. Employees do not want to spend all day gazing at environmental interpretations of the company logo or ad campaign. 'House style' is one thing. Designing the space to skillfully reflect the nuances of a company's reputation, memory and product is quite another.

Clearly, if the narrative office trend is going to last, new examples need to emerge which reflect a more sophisticated, less head-banging design approach. Narrative architecture, which has its roots in the social engineering of modernism and the behavioral psychology of the avant garde, has been around for a long time so offices have plenty of projects in other building sectors to learn from.

The tricks of storytelling are, for example, finding their way into healthcare environments, where choreographed journeys are being introduced to solve the problems of patients finding their way around hospitals. They can also be found in education

where architect John Outram's wonderfully eccentric Judge Institute of Management Studies at Cambridge University remains one of the best examples of the narrative approach.

The Judge Institute was remodeled from the city's Adenbrookes hospital building. Into the renovation, Outram decided to weave a complete landscape narrative to express the English traditions of the institution which stretch back to medieval times. An 'endless forest' of hollowed-out columns and beams carry all the building's technical services; a series of 'caves' enable researchers to work in private; and a 'river valley' is the Judge Institute's social space.

It's a fantastical scheme but something of a narrative one-off in education. Today the real action and the biggest budgets are to be found in the workplaces of the biggest brand owners. Ever since an influential Harvard Business Review article alerted business worldwide to 'the experience economy' at the end of the 1990s, the skills of shopfitting, leisure design, escapism and fantasy were destined to migrate to the workplace. And so a new office story unfolds...