

Review of 'Home', the book on the new Home Office project

By Richard Saxon *

Home Run

This is 'book as object': the square-format, padded-cover tome comes encased in a metal cage patterned on the Liam Gillick-designed brise-soleil for the building it covers; colour spreads abound, explained through miniatures at the back of the book in the manner of a top-level fashion catalogue; a supporting DVD comes in the cover; strip cartoons, or rather very French 'bande-dessinee', punctuate the story to turn it into myth. For this is Bouygues' boasting book about its success in winning and building the Home Office's new HQ at Marsham Street. It is an illuminating story, both within the book and behind it, as I know from having been a member of one of the defeated competitor teams.

The story starts with the Home Office seeking PFI bids to refurbish its 1970's HQ in Queen Anne's Gate, held on a long lease from Land Securities. The lease was deemed too expensive to escape and the expectation was that the department would decant for the duration of the works as the MOD was planning to do. Meanwhile, in another scene, Terry Farrell is promoting a scheme to replace the three derelict 'Ugly Sister' towers on Marsham Street with a more humane, mixed development. Farrell, who is rare amongst architects in creating work by pitching visions to the public, shows that a low-rise building group of the sort of size needed by the Home Office can be put in place of the hated towers, solving two problems at once. The Bouygues consortium hatches the idea to offer the Home Office not its official scheme, but a new building following the Farrell masterplan. The new building proposal is more expensive in capital terms but offers far less hassle to the Home Office and lower uncertainties and operating costs, enabling Annes Gate Partnership (AGP), the Bouygues consortium with in-house facility manager Ecovert and banker HSBC, to make a credible unitary payment bid. The Home Office is hooked, but feels it cannot just abandon the official competition, so it re-runs it on the basis that a replacement site can be offered. Of course, no-one but AGP has a site to offer, so they scoop the project: coup number one.

Coup number two is that the winning design is turned from sow's ear to silk purse. To make it fly financially, Farrell's scheme has been value-engineered to the bone. It's just three, very buildable, BCO specification blocks, the Ugly Sisters replaced by dowdy Cinderellas. CABE's reaction to the published design is incredulous: "Can this be Farrell?" Farrell himself, so the apocryphal story goes, agrees with the critique and asks for some of the design cuts to be restored. That proves not legally possible in a done deal, but, it appears, there is scope to add art. So a highly effective programme of architectural artwork, inside and out, turns the Cinderella sisters into beauties who can go to the ball. In the bande dessinée version, the hulking superheroes of Bouygues come to the shadowy guru Farrell in his pod-in-a-lake lair for guidance in removing any comparison with the Ugly Sisters: "To destroy their spirit, you must harness the essence of the rainbow; you must build a canopy of light", intones Obi-wan-Farrell. In Venturi's terms, it becomes a classic 'decorated shed'. If you know the back-story, the comments in the book make sense.

The Home Office has got itself a new home which is the equal of any recent corporate headquarters, with everyone in open plan on Aeron chairs, and colourful meeting room pods, though they are sadly under-ventilated. It now has the space to re-organise and become a department fit-for-purpose, something that would have been less possible in the old building. How it came to get it, on this difficult site with a beast of a demolition job to be done, is the meat of the book. The pictures are great and the results creditable. But its hard to not to smile: in the final bande dessinée, as the construction superheroes leave the site to super-FM Ecovert, 'Westminster' phones congratulations to 'Challenger', the Bouygues HQ outside Paris planned by Kevin Roche with the plan of a leaping frog. "Our pleasure Sir," replies Challenger, "and remember, we're just a phone call away." This book certainly sets a new standard for corporate publishing and projects the confidence and style of Bouygues in overcoming every obstacle.

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