

CULTURE

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SILICON VALLEY STARCHITECTS

For all that they fondly recall starting out in garages and student dorms, Google, Apple and Facebook are global super-clients on an imperial scale. What do their design choices say about tech firms?

By Rory Olcayto

Last Friday Google announced that its two newest third party developers, inventor Thomas Heatherwick and architect Bjarke Ingels, were 'rethinking office space' for the internet giant. No fanfare, no fireworks, just a blog post by real estate vice-president David Radcliffe outlining plans to develop its Silicon Valley campus and a YouTube promo showcasing the vision (*right*). 'The idea is simple,' Radcliffe's blog reads. 'Instead of constructing immovable concrete buildings, we'll create lightweight block-like structures which can be moved around easily as we invest in new product areas. Large, translucent canopies will cover each site, controlling the climate inside yet letting in light and air. With trees, landscaping, cafés, and bike paths weaving through these structures, we aim to blur the distinction between our buildings and nature.'

As *Guardian* critic Ollie Wainwright has said, Center Parcs got there first.

Yet there's something exciting about Heatherwick and Ingels collaborating on this super-scaled commission. Exciting, yes, but also – for those of us interested in starchitects, PR and the insufferably smart world of tech – more than a few things to mull over. These are just for starters:

Company values are reflected in their buildings

'Out of the blue, a telephone call. "It's Steve. Hi Norman. I need some help." I was out there three weeks later.' That's Norman Foster recounting how he landed the gig to design Apple's new HQ in Cupertino back in 2009. The design he created for the late Steve Jobs, a \$5 billion diamond-cut donut, dubbed the 'spaceship', has become famous for many things: the 3.7 miles of curved glass (Jobs himself told Cupertino's city council 'there's not a straight piece of glass on this building, it's all curved'); the 1/32 inch shadow gaps; the 6,000 trees selected from 300 species and 15 acres of natural grasslands. There is a flipside: just like Apple's products, the building is inscrutable, the opposite of open-source. It is off-limits to the public; defensive, like a wagon circle; and overly focused on details.

Google, on the other hand, has requested a more seemingly open workplace that blends landscape with buildings and blurs the edges of inside and out. The spatial and visual metaphor is clear: the loose framework of stackable units ranged under a see-through membrane suggests the open-source, collaborative nature of Google's business model and, as the video explains, the new campus will be open to



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the public, too. More simply, it looks like stuff caught up in a net – much like a Google search actually is stuff caught up in The Net. Its plans for interaction with the wider environment, however, are hardly world-beating: Radcliffe's blog post states Google will be 'adding lots of bike paths and retail opportunities, like restaurants, for local businesses'. That said, should we expect anything more from what is essentially a classified ads company?

Before Google announced its trendy new campus was to be designed by creative superstars Heatherwick and Ingels, Mark Zuckerberg nearly three years ago bagged Frank Gehry to design an entire Facebook town. Curiously, it looks less Gehry-like than you might expect. It's low-ish, long-ish and covered with trees. In fact Zuckerberg asked the Canadian starchitect to tone down the original design (overlapping curvy metal walls) because it's flashiness didn't sit well with Facebook's self-image. But – and it's a big but – it *will* feature the largest open plan office space in the world, housing up to 10,000 software engineers.

Starchitects and Silicon Valley are a perfect match

With Facebook, whose game plan is to overhaul Google and own the web, it's all about numbers. The bigger, obviously, the better. The biggest room in the world? That sounds a bit like Facebook itself. So what about Apple? Steve was always going to choose Norman for his gig: Foster has built his reputation on fusing architecture with technology in a user-friendly way – just like Jobs did with Apple and computing. Likewise, it now seems obvious that Google – open source, ubiquitous, collaborative – would plump for Heatherwick and Ingels, who together have conceived an 'open source' campus.

The question is, why did it take Google so long to wake up to starchitecture? Previously it had employed NBBJ, which has a track record with tech companies but lacks star

status – to design its first from-scratch buildings. Despite being rolled out in *Vanity Fair*, NBBJ's lacklustre scheme – standard-looking office blocks with green roofs and a few kinks in plan – failed to set the heater alight. Given that AHMM has recently claimed it has heard nothing from California about Google's on-hold plans for King's Cross, the high flying 'White Collar Factory' architects must be wondering if they're facing the chop. Developer Argent, too, might wonder whether Google still think King's Cross is the right place to be: you can't smell pine cones on York Way.

The war for talent

That's what this is about: 'How do we hire and keep the best staff?' Why else would the titans of Silicon valley be spending so much on real estate? As Radcliffe, a civil engineer, explains in Google's YouTube promo: 'Tech really hasn't adopted a particular language for buildings. We've just found old buildings, we've moved into them and we've made do the best we could.' And if Facebook has got a Gehry building, Apple has one by Foster, why would anyone want to work in Google's effort by NBBJ? A recent survey in British universities showed a third of prospective students had rejected an institution on the basis of the quality of its buildings. Silicon Valley is just the same.

Divide and rule

Still, Google is too powerful not to want to be the boss – all the time. It's why it has chosen two starchitects to design its new campus, rather than the more typical one: divide and rule. But it also suggests a lack of trust. It could mean, on the one hand, that Google doesn't think Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG) is creative enough to handle the design of its new campus. Or it could mean, on the other, that it doesn't believe Heatherwick Studios has the experience and skill to manage a complex building project of this kind. Or it could mean both.

Whatever, Radcliffe's reasoning on the YouTube promo is weak: 'We scoured the world looking for a special architect who could really do something different; who really listened and created something from the ground up. And we really got down to who we believe are the two best in class. BIG: they're ambitious, they do a lot of very community-focused projects and that was pretty compelling for us. Thomas, on the other hand, has this attention to human scale and beauty that I haven't seen in anyone before. And if you bring those two together: someone who really thinks about function and form and you couple that with beauty and you just have this team that does pretty amazing stuff.' See what I mean?

This image
Visualisation of Bjarke Ingels' and Thomas Heatherwick's vision for Google's Silicon Valley campus

Bottom (l-r) Frank Gehry model for a Facebook 'town'; Norman Foster's Apple HQ at Cupertino; Allford Hall Monaghan Morris visualisation for on-hold Google UK headquarters in London's King's Cross



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