

THE BIG ISSUE IN THE NORTH OFFICES

Organisation	The Big Issue in the North
Trigger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Big Issue in the North had outgrown its original headquarters and was seeking larger premises.
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To design a new headquarters that reflected the values of the organisation. To provide better facilities for the magazine vendors. To enhance the working environment of employees.
Tools/Techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working closely with the architects to identify key strategic spatial requirements. Consultation with employees and vendors.
Enablers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shared commitment to security and creating a welcoming environment for vendors.
Tensions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Whilst reduced floor-space improved transparency and security, it also decreased capacity and financial revenue.
Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The new headquarters reflect the values of the organisation and kept within a tight budget. The building is held in high esteem by the magazine vendors.
Lessons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The design should reflect and promote the values of the client. Key stakeholders, including staff and vendors, should participate in the design process.

Synopsis

This case concerns the design and planning of the Big Issue in the North building in Manchester. It shows how concerns about the protection of vendors and staff against abuse or injury have to be balanced against other design criteria. The Big Issue directors were keen that the building should reflect its values of transparency and openness. Such values were engendered through the large open area at the centre of the offices, which allowed light to flood into the heart of the building and ensured good visibility. As the sole point of entry, the reception afforded clear vision of visitors entering and leaving the building. The balance between security, transparency and cost was achieved through consultation with staff and vendors.

Background to The Big Issue in the North Offices

The Big Issue in the North started in December 1992 as a Manchester supplement within the London based magazine. It began by distributing 2,000 magazines each week from a portacabin, before moving to rented accommodation in the Northern Quarter of Manchester. The Big Issue in the North magazine helps generate motivation and self-esteem amongst homeless people. Stitt *et al* (1996) found that it helps homeless people feel better about themselves and about other homeless people. Anne McNamara views the Big Issue as “*a business solution to a social problem.*”

To expand the range of services offered to vendors, The Big Issue in the North Trust was established in 1996. As a result of a massive fundraising campaign, National Lottery money and a large regeneration grant from English Partnerships, it was able to buy its current headquarters on Oldham Street, Manchester. This case study is about the development of the offices and is based on an interview with Anne McNamara, Director, Big Issue in the North.

Big Issue in the North now produces a 48 page northern magazine that is sold in around 100 towns and cities. Employing over 70 staff, the combined turnover of The Big Issue in the North and The Big Issue in the North Trust is £2.5 million.

Design Process

The Concept

The Big Issue in the North wanted to design new headquarters that would reflect the values of the organisation, as well as provide safe and pleasant working conditions for magazine vendors and Big Issue employees. During initial discussions between the Big Issue in the North Directors and the architects, Anne McNamara expressed her view that:

“The building should convey a strong sense of transparency, openness and inclusiveness whilst carefully balancing this with the need for greater security” (Director).

The designers aimed to achieve this by providing a high degree of visibility throughout the interior.



Figure 1: the interior

They also attempted to offer a hard and robust environment which would withstand wear and tear, as well as require minimal maintenance. It was hoped that such an environment would provide security and a personal sense of well being for its occupants.

Development

High levels of visibility were achieved by stripping back the upper floors and creating a large space allowing light to flood deep into the heart of the building.



Figure 2: Light flooding into the interior

A reception desk was situated on the central axis on ground level, affording clear vision of visitors approaching, entering and leaving the building. This is the sole point of entry and exit to the building, thus reducing the opportunity for unauthorised access and the likelihood of criminal activity.



Figure 3: Reception area overlooked by offices

The offices located on the first floor overlook the public space.



Figures 4 and 5: Offices overlooking the central area

Communication

The Big Issue in the North were particularly concerned that the new headquarters were 'vendor owned'. One of the key aspects of the development was therefore that stakeholders were identified and encouraged to participate in all stages of the process, from planning and design through to building. The process was facilitated by a shared commitment to offering vendors a welcoming and secure environment.

Modification

The Big Issue North personnel continue to assess the performance of the building, refining design issues or addressing problems as and when they do arise. For example, the toilets are currently being reappraised so as to reduce the likelihood of drug misuse. Design changes being considered include the removal of discreet areas in which to hide or deposit used syringes, needles etc. The toilets already use a blue light to make it difficult for intravenous drug-users to find a vein.



Figure 6: Blue light in the toilet to reduce drug misuse

Tensions

The primary areas of tension were around cost. Whilst reducing floor space would improve transparency within the building and thus enhance security, the decreased capacity would reduce financial revenue. Thus, a balance had to be struck between these two desired outcomes. Although of significant concern, the Directors were keen that cost should not be pursued to the detriment of upholding the values and ethos of the organisation in design integrity.

Impact

The new offices have attracted considerable press coverage and this in itself has helped to promote the status of the organisation as an independent charity committed to effecting social change.



Figure 7: The new Big Issue in the North offices

The new Big Issue in the North headquarters could be considered successful on two accounts. Firstly, it offers a secure and welcoming environment to the magazine vendors, who are working towards securing a more stable lifestyle and a chance of success. Secondly, it shows that an enlightened approach to architectural design and planning can achieve security without obscuring the values of an organisation concerned to promote transparency and openness. Anne McNamara points out, however, that:

“Design is only 50% of the building with the other 50% being staff attitude and communicating the values of the organisation to both visitors and vendors” (Director).

Lessons Learned

This case study demonstrates that designing against crime can be *tailored to* the organisation’s philosophy, rather than act against it. With careful consideration of security and other design criteria, a balance can be achieved that satisfies the client. Furthermore, by identifying key stakeholders early within the design process, the participants can take ownership of the building.

References, Related Case Studies and Further Reading

Big Issue North (Undated) *‘The Big Facts: Good Homes, Good Jobs, Good Health, Good Life’*. Big Issue: Manchester

Sean Stitt, Ronnie Thomas and Sue Elliot (1996) *‘Report of Findings from a Research Study into the Big Issue’*, Centre for Consumer Education and Research, John Moores University, Liverpool, April.

Big Issue in the North Trust (1997) *‘Building the Picture – Who Are Our Vendors and What Would Make Their Life Better?’* Big Issue: Manchester.

The Big Issue in the North Trust (1998) *‘What Makes a Sustainable Tenancy?’*, The Big Issue in the North: Manchester

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Classification Index

Ekblom's crime classification	Misbehaviour (criminal damage, abuse), misappropriation (theft), mishandling (drug abuse).
BCS crime classification	Theft, burglary, criminal behaviour.
DAC	Protecting staff and vendors.
Primary motivation	Social – to support homeless people.
Type of designer	Architects
Approach	Open design
Sector	Voluntary
Location	Office building
Author	David Hands

DAC Big Issue