

# Public service

IN ADVANCE OF THE DESIGN PRIMA SHOW ON 2-4 JUNE, WE ASK DESIGNERS WHO HAVE WORKED EXTENSIVELY IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR FOR THEIR VIEWS ON THE EXPERIENCE. IS IT REALLY THAT DIFFERENT?

**C**ontinuing our theme of public sector procurement, we asked leading firms and individuals about their experiences of working in the sector: What are the specific challenges that they face and their predictions for future activity?

ID:SR, the interior design team at Sheppard Robson, has carried out many varied public-sector projects, including for The Bank of England; London Development Agency; the Gambling Commission and for a number of schools. The most recently completed project is for the London Borough

of Newham, where ID:SR helped consolidate 25 council offices into a single, modern and efficient service-support centre.

Associate at ID:SR Dan Winder explains that the principal consideration must always be people: 'If the people aren't happy with the process and the result it doesn't matter what else you get right. You've got to listen really hard and to look for different and varied ways to communicate so that everyone gets to have their say, gets the message and feels comfortable with the result, on both sides of the design fence.'

'Public sector clients are in the position of

not only being accountable, but also having to be seen to be accountable, and this has considerable implications for how the design is developed, who is involved, what the result is and how it is broadcast.'

Winder sees a specific challenge among public sector clients as expectation: 'Take Government and local authority clients – they usually come from a whole range of building stock – their expectations are commonly very low, and the main emotion to recognise is one of fear. They will have the fear that the space will be a battery farm, that it won't comply with good standards, that they won't have any sense of personal ownership or identity.'

'When they are coming into the new environment they are imagining a workplace dystopia. We try to give them the opposite and to delight and surprise them.'

Consequently, the first issue they usually have is how much it costs, but the reality is that good design doesn't "cost" more in the long term, it "costs" less.'

And what does the future hold? Will public sector spending be affected by the recession? Winder predicts a 'mixed bag': 'I suspect that we will see some projects on hold as is currently the case in the healthcare, schools and housing markets, with funds delayed by the process and withheld by Government. I expect some authorities will be able to formulate good business cases for doing work now because the procurement costs are so much lower.'

'In the latter case, it will be really important to get the project lined up and bought in the next year or so to take advantage of the



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favourable rates. Certainly local and central government, with owned assets to dispose of, will not be able to do so for a while yet, but starting projects now would enable a good 18 months or so before decanting out of old accommodation and disposing of it on the market – hopefully the market will be more buoyant by then. Organisations looking to co-locate staff in existing accommodation will find the project costs favourable and should seriously consider an early start.”

Winder sees the mechanisms in place within public sector procurement procedures as neither a help nor a hindrance: ‘They can be slow and quite bureaucratic, but they are certain and fair, whereas you can’t always say that of private-sector tender processes. I actually like working for local authority clients because once they’ve checked you out at the start of the project they don’t spend the rest of the project questioning everything you tell them. Sometimes private clients, having appointed you for your professional advice and expertise, ignore what you tell them and do it their own way. Sometimes that’s good for you though – it can force you to fine tune your game.’

TP Bennett design for a wide variety of public sector environments including: the health sector; local authority children’s services; local authority environmental services; local authority administration; central government; charitable trusts; transport and station infrastructure. Its projects are as diverse as Trinity Hospice, Heartlands High School, Guildhall and Whitehall Place.

Jonathan Darke, principal director at TP Bennett, sees the primary considerations when designing for such environments as: ‘meeting and managing the expectations of a wide array of stakeholders and the need to have very strong auditable processes, with alignment between design, programme and costs at each stage. Projects for the public

Previous page, Venue public space seating by David Fox for Connection. This page, ID:SR’s most recent project saw it consolidate 25 council offices into a single, modern service-support centre for the London Borough of Newham

sector should not automatically assume a lower standard of quality and aspiration. We should design with fusion between public and private sectors in mind. Increasingly we are utilising ideas from education environments in corporate offices and hotel concepts in health designs. Society is increasingly sophisticated and has high expectations for both private and public buildings.’

Darke explains ‘opening up minds to new ways of solving problems effectively and economically; is a specific challenge posed by public sector environments. And the future?’ ‘Much of the work is tied up with land disposal, which has been affected by the drop in demand for new residential development.

‘Accountability is extremely important in the public sector. To ensure that the project is spending tax-payers’ money effectively, all capital projects are closely scrutinised at all stages. This often slows the decision-making process down to such an extent that it can be counterproductive. Not understanding these sometimes very complex mechanisms is often a barrier to entering in to public sector

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work for new service supplier.’

We were also interested to hear from a furniture designer’s point of view. David Fox who has produced successful designs for Connection, Boss and most recently Office Chairman (among other leading manufacturers) explains: ‘I design products that overlap both sectors. To maximise sales it’s important that where possible design can be used in more than one application. In some cases there are different considerations; public sector generally gets harder use, so materials have to be more durable.’

Fox has designed for a whole host of public-sector environments: schools, which are also doubling as business areas, hospitals, and universities. ‘In the past we have seen public-sector products really over engineered, to the point where they are considered “bullet proof”, but the aesthetics have suffered, often resulting in a very chunky, inelegant solution.

‘If an environment is ugly do you respect it? I think there is definitely a halfway house; just because something is thicker, doesn’t necessarily mean it’s stronger. By applying basic design and engineering principles, delicate solutions can be achieved.’

And on future spending, Fox has this say: ‘I don’t think that the public sector will be recession proof. But people will still need to be cared for, and as unemployment rises

more people will decide to further their education. As a direct result there will be a definite need for more products in the education sector.

‘I do feel, though, that the amount of budget per product will reduce considerably, so as designers we need to be intelligent, in the use of material and manufacturing process we use to offer the best value for money with the highest possible design content.’

Overbury works in a variety of different public-sector environments and has done so for many years. These include central government departments and myriad organisations that make up each larger department, local authorities, PCTs and other trust organisations, and the charitable and non-profit sectors.

Dan Jarrold of Overbury offers another perspective: ‘Essentially there are no differences in our approach to a project in the public or commercial sector. Public sector bodies are modern procurement-savvy organisations which behave in a very similar way to the commercial sector.

‘They demand the same quality, accountability and value for money and their projects are set up to deliver this.’

Jarrold continues: ‘In every fit-out or refurbishment project, the ultimate client will have their particular requirements, and their own culture – and it is very important these are understood and reflected by the delivery team. They range from avoiding disruption, sensitivity to neighbours, early delivery of elements of the project, technical expertise, safety and many more.

‘These concerns reflect the client and the project and are not usefully defined as public or commercial sector, although it is generally true that public sector clients place a higher emphasis on environment and CSR.

‘They are also likely to run more stringent prequalification processes and seek more evidence on the health, safety and environmental performance when selecting a main contractor. All of which we are happy to provide.

‘Public-sector offices and premises also tend to demonstrate best practice on the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act and will often require these elements to be considered within their design.’

And looking to the future within the current economic environment, we can end on a positive note with these thoughts from Overbury: ‘Generally, Government spending on construction is increasing, especially in infrastructure, health and education projects. The local authority sector is also active. This spend helps to keep the industry active while commercial and development projects are fewer.’

*Design Prima: 2-4 June, BDC, London. For more information and visitor registration go to [www.designprima.com](http://www.designprima.com)*

