

Notes from Andrew Laing

I am writing these brief reflections on how I perceived DEGW and what it stood for, and how it impacted my own thinking, very much from an autobiographical point of view. I identified three strands or aspects of these impacts which I describe below:

- User research
- Work and the City
- Culture

User research

When I first joined DEGW in 1989 (after coming back to London after studying urban studies at MIT) I did not really understand what the firm was doing (although I was fascinated and attracted by the work culture – see below). I had been told we did something called ‘space planning’. I did not know what that was. I discovered gradually that what we were doing, and this I think was unique in its scale and rigour at the time, was developing ways of doing systematic user research and translating the results into briefs or requirements for design. Research based ‘Briefing’ was what we did. I think what was unique and significant about this approach in the early 1990’s was that we were doing both client specific user research, programming, and briefs, as well as systematic research studies that informed those briefs and which also informed the wider direction of the workplace design industry on both the supply and demand side.

I was excited to be able to work on several multi-client funded collaborative research studies that usually combined groups of clients (private and public) into a sustained research effort that they funded. These ‘multi-client’ studies usually entailed us posing big research questions such as What is a Responsible Workplace, or What is an Intelligent Building, or What are New Ways of Working? The amazing thing was first that we could define what seemed to be the most pressing questions of the day in our field, and second, that we could persuade, not without a lot of effort, groups of companies and governments to fund and collaborate in this kind of research. Our research grew in scale to include global partners in Europe, Asia, and the Americas. The original model for this kind of research had been pioneered by DEGW in the 1980’s with the ORBIT studies.

I think the real kernel of this was the confidence and ambition to ask important questions about the *nature of change* which necessarily took us outside the narrow, siloed purview of conventional design thinking and programming. It took us heavily towards issues of information technology, environmental sustainability, but most importantly towards ‘what would end users want and need’ to be productive and successful in work environments of all kinds, in many kinds of places and settings.

This focus on the user needs and requirements also of course differentiated our practice in the marketplace and associated the brand of DEGW with published innovative research of high quality.

2. Work and the city

The focus on user research led DEGW to work closely with others on the impacts of technology on the workplace. This led us to look closely at work patterns over time in space and to develop tools for measuring space utilization, the famous time utilization studies. As this work evolved we began to think much more about mobility and distributed working and the idea of ‘work and the city’ became

significant (the title of Frank's book published in 2008). But this concept of looking beyond the workplace or office to the city had always been part of DEGW's thinking. Much of the early user research work in the 1990's was sectoral and related to distinctive urban building types and neighborhoods e.g. the financial services sector, the legal sector, the government sector. I know that much of John's work at DEGW focused in the re-use and rehabilitation of buildings and urban areas. In fact, the building appraisal techniques that assessed the performance of buildings against sectoral user needs was often driven by the needs of developers to understand how their buildings should perform in different urban areas for different kinds of clients. This ability to connect work (and technology) to the thinking about the design of buildings and the nature of urbanism is one that has remained of deep interest to me in my current teaching and research efforts.

Culture

But I think the two strands above of user research and connecting work to the city, are representative of a more fundamental feature of the DEGW practice: the willingness, indeed the expectation, that our work should cross boundaries. The practice built a culture that was radically questioning, dissatisfied with conventional concepts, and eager to challenge the thinking of clients, end users, and above all ourselves. The practice wanted to reach out and connect with others in disparate fields, and bring them into a dialogue about the changing workplace and design at every scale. This involved sharing ideas very widely and in many different forms. It was very much 'giving to get'. It seems to me that this radical questioning and open-ended way of exploring is a feature now of successful business practices. It also made for a deeply satisfying work culture that attracted people who wanted to work in that way and who were motivated to stay with the company through many hardships (the innovation did not always provide for economic security or financial success). Working at DEGW was never just 'another job'. That experience is of course what every ambitious start up is trying to create today!

To finish, what I remember most about being interviewed at DEGW in 1989 at Bulstrode Place was not the great people I met that day, but the hustle and bustle of the reception area where people were running in and out on what appeared to be missions of great importance. The reception area expressed a level of energy that was attractive and exciting, which is why I joined the firm. It was a great expression of the culture.