Design and Business DNA

Raymond Turner, Group Design Director, BAA
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It’s not often that you get the opportunity to start with a totally blank sheet of paper and apply a consistent design approach to every aspect of a project. I have been fortunate enough to be involved in two such projects in the past few years: Eurotunnel, a drive-on rail shuttle connecting England and France; and the recently opened Heathrow Express, a high-speed passenger-train service connecting London with Heathrow Airport. Hopefully, this experience will stand me in good stead for the biggest project of them all—the fifth terminal at Heathrow—but that is a story for another day.

Both Eurotunnel and Heathrow Express encompassed virtually every aspect of design—buildings, landscapes, hardware, interiors, information systems and services, and, of course, transport. Both had the potential to demonstrate how a single strong design vision could unite management thinking behind a common purpose and deliver a fully integrated design solution. Both were largely unconstrained by existing buildings or systems, so there was every opportunity to break with the past and be innovative. Both required the creation of new service brands, so there was an added business incentive for innovation and synergy. Yet only Heathrow Express managed to deliver a fully integrated, innovative design solution. Why? Because there was a shared understanding right from the start about what it was that we were setting out to create and how important design was going to be in delivering the service.

Frustrating
From a political and an engineering perspective, Eurotunnel was a fantastic engineering achievement, and in design terms there is a great deal about it that is good. But I have to count it as one of my more disappointing design management experiences. The entente cordiale didn’t

HE FORMER DESIGN manager for Eurotunnel and now group design director for London-based BAA, the world’s largest privately owned airport company, Raymond Turner shares his wisdom on the necessity and techniques for diffusing design responsibility throughout an organization. As a service business, BAA regards its staff as “experience managers.” Quality design is essential to the success of those customer experiences and is, under Turner’s leadership, guided by five essential corporate design values.

by Raymond Turner

It’s not often that you get the opportunity to start with a totally blank sheet of paper and apply a consistent design approach to every aspect of a project. I have been fortunate enough to be involved in two such projects in the past few years: Eurotunnel, a drive-on rail shuttle connecting England and France; and the recently opened Heathrow Express, a high-speed passenger-train service connecting London with Heathrow Airport. Hopefully, this experience will stand me in good stead for the biggest project of them all—the fifth terminal at Heathrow—but that is a story for another day.

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extend as far as the design activity and, despite my best endeavors, I was never able to fully integrate the French and English design teams. I found that we were redesigning things on both sides of the Channel. What made this doubly frustrating was that the Eurotunnel was a demonstrably integrated product that, after all, bridged two countries. It was disappointing to me to find that there was such a desperate need on each side of the channel to create a sense of national identity via this project—when here was an opportunity to create something unique! Even where the value of design consistency was readily apparent, as in the passenger information systems, the case for a single solution still had to be argued. The very act of product naming proved problematic. The French wanted something to reflect the inspirational qualities of the service; the English wanted something more functional. I can quite understand why the French and English fought each other for 100 years!

Eurotunnel taught me that if you are to stand any hope of delivering a single-minded design vision, you need single-minded senior management and a shared understanding of what it is you are setting out to achieve.

Engrossed
When I moved to BAA six years ago, I was immediately faced with what should have been my second “blank sheet” infrastructure project—Heathrow Express. Unfortunately, someone had already started writing on the sheet. Visionaries and planners had been talking about building such a rail link for almost 40 years; so when it finally got the go-ahead, it was perhaps understandable that this project was very much engineering-led. I found that we had people working on the trains, others on the stations, others on the tunnel, and so on. The company had become engrossed in the engineering parts, but had not defined the whole. Was it to be a low-cost, no-frills commuter service on a par with the London underground, or a premium service that would take the airport, and its associations with excitement and modernity, and project them into the heart of London?

To help that product-definition process, we described a number of product propositions and produced visuals showing what they would mean in terms of customer experience and infrastructure design: the qualities and characteristics of each option. With something tangible to debate, BAA’s senior management found they favored the premium service option, and its viability was confirmed through research.

Once the vision had been established, BAA management became passionate about seeing it realized. They recognized that their existing train and station designs didn’t match the product position, and that every other aspect of the service would need to be designed to support this brand position. They wiped the page clean again, enabling my team to make a fresh start at designing the product.

Commitment
The service was opened last year and, as an example of design’s ability to manifest a corporate mission, it is a real tour de force. It is everything that Eurotunnel could (and should) have been. It shows just what can be achieved on a project if there is a common understanding, at senior management level, of what you are setting out to deliver and a wholehearted commitment to using design to achieve it. However, it takes time to build that awareness and understanding—longer than most people think. As a rule of thumb, I don’t think you can expect to see truly radical change within the life of one chief executive.

In BAA, design is recognized as a board responsibility, but this is not true of most UK businesses. Few companies can tell you how much they spend on design; it’s basically a large sum of money that the board knows little about. The problem is that the sum is usually spread across so many departments that the full extent of the design investment is rarely understood, let alone what return should be expected from it.

Once you are able to scope out the cost of the activity, design quickly becomes a board agenda item. The trick then is to make sure that the board does not see design as merely an avoidable cost but instead comes to appreciate its value as a wealth-creating corporate resource.

Selling the strategic importance of design at board level is hard work, but it is a battle you can win. However, you can lose the design war on the
ground if the strategic intent isn’t delivered in the
day-to-day business activities. Don’t underestimate
the frailty of the design solution. After a new facility
or service is launched, its operation and mainte-
nance often passes to people who have little or no
understanding of the original design intent and how
their actions can reinforce or destroy it. As a result,
well-intentioned, but ill-informed, day-to-day
actions can chip away at design integrity. In BAA,
for example, we have a constant battle against a
“sticky-tape culture” that seems to delight in
putting up temporary signs and barriers—
completely unacceptable to a quality experience.

As the shift from manufacturing-based to
service-based industry continues, more people will
be placed in a customer-facing position in which
they can undo all sorts of good design work with a
careless word or action. This means design has to
establish its relevance to a much wider audience
inside the company.

What was particularly satisfying about Heathrow
Express was the way BAA took on this challenge.
The service ethic is not strong in the UK, and it’s
probably at its worst in transport facilities. To make
sure the Heathrow Express service was delivered in
the right way, BAA set up a highly intensive recruit-
ment screening process that made sure only those
with a natural disposition toward customer care
were taken on. It must say something about the
current state of customer service in the UK
transport industry that only 10 percent of the
customer-facing staff recruited for Heathrow
Express came from a rail background!

By including brand awareness training as part of
the recruitment and induction process, we were
able to give staff a clear understanding of why things
were as they were and, in the process, we developed
a small number of champions who would be
committed to living the brand and to protecting its
expression through design.

**Challenge**

Involving everyone is, I believe, the major challenge
facing design in the future. If you recognize that
design is in crisis in your organization, you might
decide your first step should be to understand the
context of design—where it touches your business.
You might then set out to control design by
developing a design policy or a design management
process or by appointing design managers. But
design will never become truly effective until it
moves out of the specialist box and becomes part
of the DNA of the business.

Bearing in mind that in BAA’s business a toilet
cleaner’s actions can actually have more influence
over customer perceptions of service than the ac-
tions of a chief executive, we needed a way to bring
the relevance of design home to everyone. It had to
be easily understood. It had to provide a framework
of reference against which day-to-day design and
operational decisions could be made.

**Experience**

We developed the central idea that we should think
of ourselves not so much as an organization of
“people movers” as an organization passionately
concerned with the quality of experience of every-
one using our airports—passengers, airlines, conces-
sonaires, retailers, and staff. This was a profound
shift in our thinking and one everyone could relate
to, because everyone has the opportunity, directly or
indirectly, to shape the customer’s experience for
good or bad. As our thinking developed around
what it meant to be a company of “experience man-
gers,” we began to understand how we could use
this idea to inform much of our design work. We
began to define the experience people should have
when using different parts of our airports, and it
became clear we were developing the basis of design
briefs for each of those parts. To illustrate the ap-
proach, we took a simple journey from home to the
airport and divided it into a number of separate but
related steps. Then we described how, at each step,
we could use design to manage people’s experience
for the better.

Arrival at the airport, for example, should be
acknowledged with a clear orientation space so that,
on entering the terminal, passengers can take stock
of what to do next. We need to reduce the visual
clutter, clearly separate operational and commercial
spaces, and provide neutral backdrops for clear
communications. At check-in, research shows that
passengers need to experience order and familiarity
in the spatial layout, with defined zones and mar-
shaling areas, as well as a clear queuing regime.

Beyond security and immigration, the experi-
ence is characterized by a different set of ideas. Here
is the requirement, and the opportunity, to create
memorable positive experiences with innovative and exciting airside lounge and retail spaces. Our opportunity is to create a sense of theatre and surprise on the one hand, balanced with places to relax on the other—an Aladdin’s cave with an oasis of calm. We can emphasize the natural theater of the airfield and the coming excitement of air travel with views of the apron and runway.

**Relevant**

There are, of course, many other steps on this journey, but these few serve to highlight two basic propositions: First, customer experiences can be managed; second, a carefully focused design effort can help manage customer experiences for the better. The strength of this design vision is that it recognizes no organizational boundaries and involves the maximum number of people. It is as relevant to maintenance engineers as it is to retailers or operational managers. The experience is delivered by the environment, by the fixtures and fittings, and by the people who run the airports.

The downside is that as people understand the design intent and the part they have to play in delivering and maintaining the design vision, they begin to feel empowered to make decisions that affect design. So how do you stop ad hoc design work that goes against strategy, reinvents the wheel, or is simply bad?

We have lots of examples of people sitting in high places being responsible for design around the world. But in BAA, as with most large organizations, it’s not appropriate to have a centrally based and powerful guru responsible for making all design decisions—nor do I think it a particularly effective way to manage design.

For a start, there are simply too many issues to be addressed for one person to do that effectively or efficiently, and as soon as you stop driving people down the right path, they will revert to their old ways. Good design leaders need to be able to provide firm direction with a light management touch. They must rely on the authority of their argument, not the argument of their authority.

We’re putting an end to the days of the corporate design department sitting in its ivory tower, waiting for business to beat a path to its door. Design managers have to get out there and help people at all levels of the company make the right decisions. We have to nurture design awareness and help people discover the right way for themselves. We now have people at all levels of the business in BAA talking about the customer experience. Which is good news, because design really is far too important to be left just to designers.

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**BAA’s Five Design Values**

1. **Responsiveness**—satisfying the needs and exceeding the expectations of customers and staff. That means listening to people, putting them first, and meeting their special needs. It means anticipating and adapting to changing markets and social attitudes. It means designing from the inside out, rather than from the outside in. For architects, it means recognizing that our buildings are first and foremost meant to be experienced by people. Architectural awards come second.

2. **Appropriateness in style and quality**—designing and building what’s right for us and our customers. That means being sympathetic to established visual character, using standardization to ensure specified levels of quality, and providing customers with the best while being cost effective for the company. Appropriate quality, in design terms, starts with the selection of the right designer for the job and includes deciding whether terrazzo, carpet, or linoleum is appropriate as a floor covering.

3. **Innovation and excitement**—making the most of our creative opportunities. This means expressing our differences, making our communications vivid and exciting, creating positively memorable environments and, above all, leading the market. We should design memorable environments that reflect the excitement of air travel, always checking that we do not value-engineer away the most stimulating elements of our design proposals—because customers do notice. Dramatic spaces have always been associated with major travel-related buildings, and indeed with particular companies—TWA in New York, the new terminal building at Kansai in Japan, the new international train station at Waterloo in London, and the famous tunnel at Chicago’s United Airways terminal. We should look to create surprise.

4. **Responsibility**—designing in a socially and environmentally conscious manner. This means using ecologically friendly techniques and materials, avoiding waste, and acting with integrity. It means being concerned with issues such as noise pollution and the use of nonreplaceable resources. Being responsible is, however, not only about the environment. And this attitude of preserving resources goes beyond the environmental aspect. We try to ensure that we don’t waste a lot of time doing things that have been done before. Time wasting is every bit as bad as money wasting.

5. **Simplicity, clarity, and coherence**—making the customer experience predictable and trouble-free. That means making the company easy to deal with, achieving a sense of order by making processes and facilities familiar, designing spaces that are logical to use and easy to care for. It means being conscious of what it is like to move from one space to another and realizing that customers expect some continuity in lighting, finishes, colors, materials, and so on.