

Building the Gherkin: Film Director's Statement

By Mirjam von Arx

“You cannot set out to build a landmark”, said Carla Picardi, Swiss Re’s Building Director for the planning phase, on our first day of shooting, “just as you cannot set out to be popular or do something great. It just happens.”

In November 2000, 30 St Mary Axe – as the building is officially called – existed only as a blueprint. But due to its size and distinctive shape, the tower was already one of the most recognized buildings in the City and widely ridiculed in the media as the “erotic gherkin”. Despite all that, hopes for this first tall structure to have received planning permission in the City of London in almost 30 years were great.

Too great? Can a single building really change the career of an architect, the image of an international company and even the skyline of a big city?

We embarked on this journey with architect Norman Foster, Swiss Re – the building’s owner and one of the world’s largest reinsurance companies – and the City of London without knowing what the outcome would be. Would the media and fellow architects mock the aging founder of one of the most renowned architectural practises, as they did after the news spread of the leaking Reichstag in Berlin or the wobbly Millennium Bridge spanning over the Thames? Would the new London headquarters, bringing together employees from five different locations, create the more innovative and productive working environment Swiss Re’s CEO, John Coomber, hoped for and would it help to raise the company's profile? And could the City Planner, Peter Rees, convince English Heritage and the other conservation bodies in London that exciting new architecture was vital to bringing new business to the City?

Over the period of four and a half years we covered the planning and construction of this new building, shooting close to 100 hours of footage. Much has happened during this time. Moments of joy, when the not yet finished structure was already celebrated by an prestigious exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art in Denmark, and moments of sadness, when the World Trade Center in New York was attacked and brought down, only one month and one day prior to the erection of the first steel beam of the new tower in London.

None of us involved in the project would have dared to imagine just how popular the controversial “erotic gherkin” would be. But it has happened. “The Gherkin” – as the building now is affectionately named (although not officially) – has become one of the best-loved landmarks in the whole of London. And it has won many architectural awards, including the RIBA Stirling Prize 2004.

In the end, the four and a half years of hard work have paid off for us, as we got a chance to cover the construction of a true landmark that sparked everyone’s imagination and to witness a major change of a great city’s skyline.

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